SEX & VIOLENCE IN COMICS: WHO'S TO BLAME?

"The industry did not act courageously last time there was a threat."
FRANK MILLER

"I view ratings as a hedge against censorship."
JOHN BYRNE

"It's censorship, pure — or not so pure — and simple."
JERRY PERLES

#43

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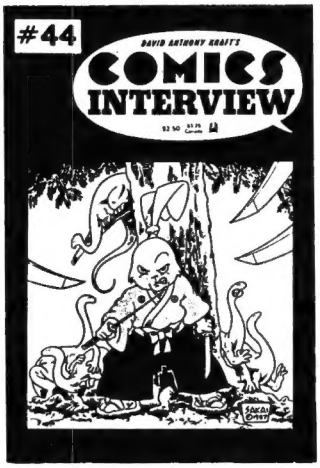

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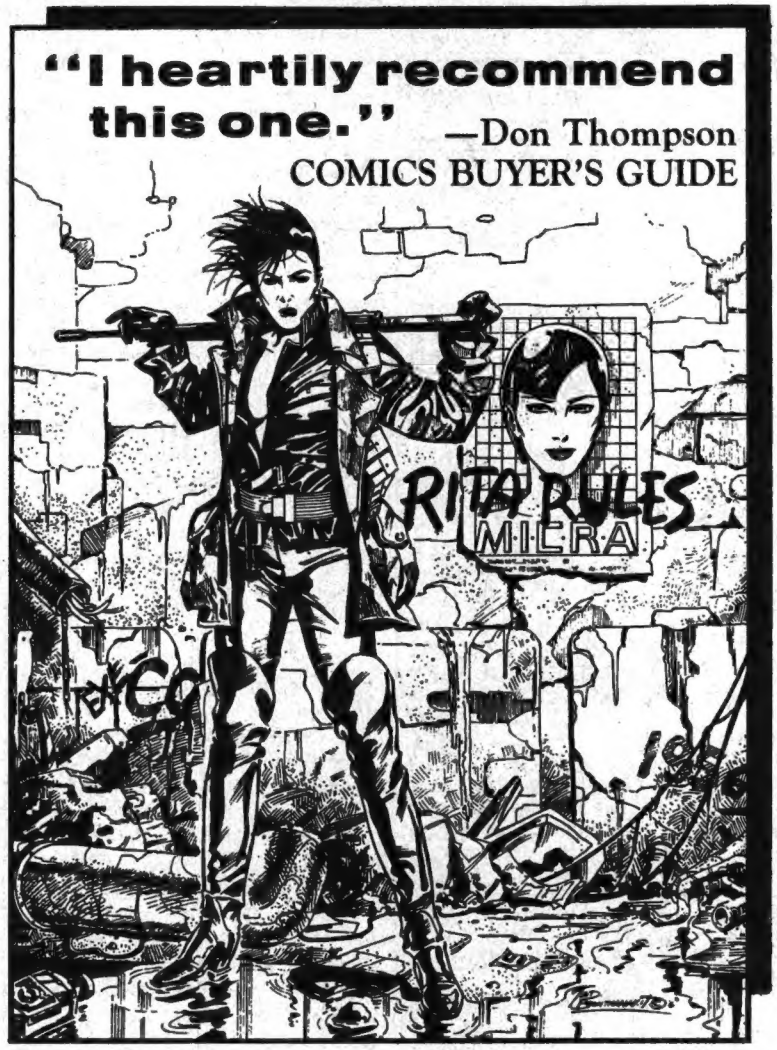
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CENSORED!

UP

The Rating Game

"When there are no formal rules, no thou shalts and thou shalt nots, it is difficult to notice, even, that one is being censored. It is all so painless. It is still more difficult to understand that one may be censoring oneself, extensively, ruthlessly — because that act of self-censorship is called, with full social approval, 'writing for the market'; it is even used by some writers as the test and shibboleth for that most admired state of being, 'professionalism.'

"Indeed, to distinguish free enterprise from self-censorship takes a most uncomfortable degree of vigilance. And that so easily becomes paranoia."

— Ursula K. Le Guin,
"The Stalin in the Soul"

I have before me a copy of the Lansing, Illinois, Police Department Case Report for the "Obscenity" offense against Friendly Frank's Comic Shop, along with **Frank Mangiaracina's** letter concerning the arrest. The letter states that "the written complaint only mentioned the ADULT ILLUSTRATED FANTASY MAGAZINE (HEAVY METAL), BIZARRE SEX #5 (featuring Omaha), THE BODYSSEY (Corben), MURDER (#2 or #3 or both), OMAHA THE CAT DANCER #1, #2, and #3, and WEIRDO #17 and #18 which the States Attorney supposedly stated were all obscene." The books were purchased by Officer **Anthony J. Van Gorp**, who declines to state his age on the report, but I think it safe to assume he is over 18 to 21 years of age. Also note that the report does not mention that these books were sold to minors, although **Van Gorp** says that, "I observed a youth looking through a magazine with the words 'The adult illustrated fantasy magazine' on the cover." Though I haven't a copy of the **Corben** book, I do have the others, *all* of which carry advisory labels "Adults Only" on their covers; even the negligible MURDER sports a relatively prominent labelling "Suggested For A Mature Audience" on its cover. One of the labels was so prominent that the arresting officer confused it for the title of the magazine. So Friendly Frank's was busted for selling comics, *clearly labelled* as being for adult readers, to an adult.

Proof positive that rating and/or labelling comics intended for adult readers is a viable means of sidestepping the spectre of legal arrest and censorship, right?

Ask Friendly Frank.

The immediate cause for concern lies in the question, "How is the simple act of labelling or rating a comic considered an act of censorship?" (I have already considered whether labelling is effective "protection" against possible arrest or enforced external censorship above; obviously, it is not, and the recent "bust" of Friendly Frank's proves that.) To answer the question, we must agree on some working definitions for the words that are being bandied about so freely by all sides in this debate.

this debate.

Since the earliest discussions of this issue, there have been crippling confusions over the constant redefinition and clarification of the "labels" or "ratings" that are proposed as solutions to the imagined threat we "must" fear. Even in the context of THE COMICS JOURNAL's active catalytic role in the debate, the confusion of the nature and implementation of the proposed "labels"and/or "ratings" led to muddled conclusions. **Gary Groth**, in his editorial in *TCJ* #88, seems to be arguing for "labelling," while in the same issue (and more prominently in *TCJ* #85) **Jan Strnad** clearly calls for the establishment of a "ratings" system, even proposing a system modeled directly upon the MPAA (Motion

FRONT

Picture Association of America) movie ratings system. Careful reading shows them to be at cross-purposes.

For the sake of this discussion, let us agree upon working definitions and distinctions between "labels" and "ratings." Bear with me. . .

Let us say that a *label* is placed voluntarily on a completed work of comic art. The labelling is not a mandatory company or industry practice; it is the decision of the creator and/or publisher to label, or not to label, once they have assessed the completed comic. The comic book is created and executed without regard for the label; hence, the label itself is neither a restriction nor a goal. It has no real importance to the creator or publisher — it is only important to the retailer and consumer as a means of identifying the content and tone of the comic.

In all aspects, it is merely a *label*.

Now, let us say a *rating* is *required labelling* of all works of comic art. All books *must* be rated, either by company or (shudder) industry rule and enforcement. If they are not rated, they are unlikely to be promoted and/or tolerated in the commercial marketplace. Furthermore, certain ratings subject books to "controlled distribution"; i.e., they are not promoted or distributed in certain commercial outlets and locales. Since the rating is a standard of the company and/or industry, and may determine the commercial success and survival of the book, the rating *must* be considered during all aspects of the creation and execution of the "work." By its very existence and use, it becomes a restriction and/or a goal, determining the nature of the book as it also determines its target audience and place within the marketplace. The ratings system also requires the establishment and support of a ratings bureau or board, responsible for the "fair" application and enforcement of the ratings themselves.

Keep these working definitions in mind throughout this article. They help us answer the question I brought up earlier.

In a nutshell, labelling or rating is not an act of censorship if it does not alter or interfere with the creative process. If it *does,* in any significant manner, alter or obstruct the creative process, it is indeed a form of censorship.

Given our working definition, any sort of ratings system is certainly censorship, however much its perpetrators may insist otherwise.

"From the very beginning of my tenure at the [MPAA], I had sought a way to assure freedom of the screen, to underbrace the right of the filmmaker to say what he chose in the way and form he determined without anyone forcing him to cut one millimeter of film or threatening to refuse him exhibition. . . . I would hope it is fair to say that today the screen has never been more free from the standpoint of the filmmaker's right to create any story he wants to tell. And at the same time, the public is better advised in advance by the ratings about the content of films than ever before. . ."

— Jack Valenti,
President of the MPAA

"We submitted the film to them six times. The trims were literally one frame at a time. . . . The woman I talked to, Lola Mintz [of the Los Angeles MPAA Branch], told me 'If some movies were being rated today, they'd get an X.' She mentioned THE EXORCIST, THE THING, and ALIEN. The one they felt the most upset about allowing to go through with an R rating is FRIDAY THE 13TH. Now they've set a precedent for the horror films to follow. Still, they're more repressive now than they've ever been. . . .

"There are no published standards for what is allowable or not allowable for certain ratings. The first thing they tell you is that they are not censoring your movie, they are just 'grading' it. You are

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free to accept the rating or not. But if you go out with no rating, you'll be lucky to do half the business. . . . An unrated film is treated like an X-rated film, no one under 18 is admitted. That cuts out a huge amount of your audience. . ."

— Stuart Gordon,
director of REANIMATOR and
FROM BEYOND

The most unsettling thing about the recently publicized DC Comics letter and statement of standards and practices is that no clue is given as to *how* these measures will be implemented, or how they will interact (if at all) with the Comics Code Authority. Given the current state of confusion at DC, it seems they hadn't really thought through the implementation of their rating system. The stated guidelines are so open to interpretation that the necessity of forming a bureau (of editors? assistants? production people?) to translate and put into effect the new policies seems unavoidable. As DC remains mum as to how the ratings system will work (if at all; presently most editors deny its very existence, insisting that it was merely a public relations gesture that will have no impact upon DC product or relations with creative personnel. . . though, of course, it already has, as we have all seen), we can only guess and conjecture what might have been or may yet be. It seems fair to base such conjecture upon the workings of the model for DC's system, the MPAA Ratings system.

At this point, let me ignore DC's proposed system in particular and consider instead the possibility of *any* rating system working in the comics industry. Or, should I say, *not* working too well, either as a solution to the current fears of distributors and retailers, or as a fair method of simply labelling product for merchants and readers. You may insist that I have stacked the deck with my working definition of "rating," but I base my working definition upon the actual practice and very real ramifications of the MPAA's existing ratings system.

The assumption (another gross assumption) from the beginning of this debate has been that the MPAA Ratings system is a successful and viable model of how a ratings system *should* work, a perfect, obviously practicable "role model" that can and should be emulated. Its acceptance by the motion picture industry and its longevity would seem to justify its practice, and public awareness of its workings would seem to confirm its viability. Recent public outcry over the effectiveness of the PG rating led to prompt institution of a new rating, PG 13, to indicate films that can be attended by children, though parental discretion is advised due to the "intense" nature of the film's content. Such quick dealing with a designated "flaw" in the ratings system was applauded, and seemed to justify its existence all the more.

In the previously mentioned COMICS JOURNAL #85, comic creator Jan Strnad presented his carefully researched proposal for self-regulation of the comics industry, "Bitter Harvest." The thrust of his article was very specific, outlining Jan's own suggested Comic Book Rating System, acknowledging his emulation of the MPAA Ratings system. His ratings ("A" for all readers, "P" for Parent's discretion, "M" for mature readers, and "X" for adults only) echo the MPAA's ("G" for general audiences, "PG" — previously "M," then "GP" — for Parental discretion, with the addition of "PG 13" as a further gradation, "R" for restricted audiences, no one under 17 admitted without parent or guardian, and "X," adults only) and clearly foreshadowing DC's own streamlining of the same designations ("U" for universal, "M" for mature, "A" for adults only).

Jan lays his groundwork with an accurate chronology of the motion picture industry's struggle with self-regulation since its beginnings. Significantly, Jan ends this chronology with the establishment of the MPAA code in November of 1968, and its intent as stated by MPAA President Jack Valenti (quoted, in part, above). Jan does not choose to continue his chronology with an account of the practical application of Valenti's fair-sounding ideals, and therein lies my own difficulty with accepting Jan's case; he does not follow his chronology through to its completion, for to do so reveals that the MPAA Ratings system, despite Valenti's stated intentions and the longevity of the system's application, does *not* work. The movie ratings system has become an active form of commercial censorship of the most elusive and insidious kind.

I hope the quotes from Valenti and director Stuart Gordon already indicate how the implementation of the ratings system has evolved into an arbitrary and despicably covert system of censorship, directly influencing the very manner in which American films are made (i.e., as in our working definition, altering and/or obstructing the creative process as the rating itself becomes a commercial goal). The Catch-22, providing the obligatory denial of "censorship" even as they call for the cutting and recutting of literally miles of film footage, is that the filmmaker *need not accept* the rating the board gives his/her film. Indeed, the R rating is a contracted commitment for most film makers. For instance, Clive Barker with his directorial debut film HELLRAISER, due out later this year, *must* "play ball" with the MPAA to secure the R rating his contract specifically demands. For as uninhibited a horror writer as Barker, whose excesses often lend vital substance to his stories (like George Romero before him), such a creative compromise may prove telling. More to the point, the R versus X controversy over Brian DePalma's SCARFACE (1983) and, more recently, Alan Parker's ANGEL HEART (1987), makes it clear that the threat of an X rating leads *directly* to active censorship. Both films *had* to be cut to attain the R rating.

The marketplace has so thoroughly stacked the deck against unrated films (particularly *independent* unrated films), that for many filmmakers there is little choice but to cooperate with the board and, when necessary, alter the "completed" work accordingly. I hesitate to say "completed" because the ratings themselves have become goals, significantly controlling the final shape the films take during the editing process. Though *legally* no film is being refused exhibition, the end result is still the same: with few exceptions, unrated films are treated as X rated films, meaning they have very limited access to theatrical distribution, most newspapers will not advertise them as a matter of policy, and they are there fore denied even moderate production budgets since their chances of returning costs and making a profit are slim indeed in such a controlled marketplace (remember, unlike comics, film production of even the most rudimentary kind is a very expensive proposition these days).

The classic example of this is independent Pittsburgh film maker George Romero. After the notoriety and overwhelming success of his unrated first film, NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (1968) — a film which perhaps in its own way led to the institution of the MPAA rating system — Romero continued to work in comparitive obscurity until the success of 1978's sequel, DAWN OF THE DEAD. At the time, Romero's decision to release DAWN OF THE DEAD without an MPAA rating was considered by many a brazen and foolhardy move.

The MPAA-controlled marketplace had no room for his incredibly violent — but utterly sexless — adventure/horror films unless he chose to cut the

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film into insensibility to attain the "safety" of an R rating. Given the persistent public equation of the X rating with sexual pornography by the mid-1970s, Romero saw little alternative than to release his uncut DAWN OF THE DEAD sans rating. When the film met with phenomenal worldwide financial success, Romero's stand was vindicated.

It seemed he had beaten the system.

Soon, the major studios were picking up independent (and, usually, explicitly violent) horror films in hopes of striking the same vein of gold *with* the sanction of the MPAA R rating — most notably with Paramount's FRIDAY THE 13TH series. In the process, and in the span of only a few years, the marketplace had squeezed out the possibility of another such *truly* independent wild card meeting public acceptance and financial reward.

By the 1980s, the ground Romero had broken had moved to bury him. Still refusing to submit his work to the MPAA (with the notable exception of his collaboration with pop writer Stephen King, CREEPSHOW, in 1982), Romero was unable to raise the necessary financing to produce the third film of the trilogy, DAY OF THE DEAD, as the ambitious and significantly unrated epic he had conceived of. In the end, the budget for Romero's DAY was cut drastically, forcing hasty, debilitating restruction of the script and the entire production mere weeks before filming. The film, released unrated in 1985, found few playdates as most theatres — especially the proliferating shopping mall theatrical chains — refused to accept unrated, independent fare as a matter of policy.

Thus, even *unrated* films now suffer very real censorship within the confines of a commercial marketplace that seems irrevocably wedded to the whims of the rating system it nurtures and subscribes to.

Even more disturbing in its duplicity is the manner in which the goal of a particular rating may not only result in the removal of unapprovable content, but in the corruption of a film via the *addition* of "stronger" content. For instance, a horror film *without* an R rating has been considered an uncommercial proposition since the mid-1970s. Cases in point: John Carpenter with THE FOG (1979) and, more recently, Wes Craven with DEADLY FRIEND (1986) have both directed atmospheric and understated genre exercises, only to have the studios *insist* upon the shooting and insertion of explicit violence to bring the films up to the desired R rating.

Finally, one must question the validity of a ratings system whose standards (i.e., the factors that determine what rating is applicable to a given film and why) remain so amorphous and ever-changing. The clearest example would be films that were rated M — Mature, the equivalent of the current PG rating — in the early '70s would undoubtedly be rated R in the current marketplace (such as the obscure BLOOD AND LACE, 1970, and the mainstream John Wayne rites-of-passage western, THE COWBOYS, 1971, both of which are graphically violent). A decade need not pass for the fluctuating standard of the MPAA to be seen; the public acceptance and critical prestige earned by MIDNIGHT COWBOY (1969) and A CLOCKWORK ORANGE (1971) assured the shift from their original X ratings to the commercially acceptable R ratings would be granted with nary a frame cut.

Furthermore, popular and/or influential filmmakers seem able to "buy" the desired rating, while others are treated with disdain *because* of their popularity. Had anyone but Steven Spielberg attempted to "buy" a PG rating for films like POLTERGEIST (1982), GREMLINS (1984) and INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM (1984) — all films that would have earned an R rating under apparent MPAA standards of the times — the rating board would have balked. Given, however, Spielberg's prestige within the industry as a financial wizard and popular filmmaker, and the fact that the films in question had already been marketed toward a juvenile audience prior to their submission to the ratings board (remember the racks and racks of lovable Gremlins dolls?) the golden PG rating was granted. Only after the ensuing parental and public outcry did the PMAA cover their ass by instituting the PG-13 rating.

Isolating the films from these conditions of affluence versus disdain, there seems to be little consistent application of coherent standards to the films themselves. As a result, the ratings are not merely advisory labels placed upon the films for the benefit of the public: they have become a power within the marketplace, subject to manipulation, corruption, and abuse.

There is no reason to believe that such would not be the case in the comics industry if, indeed, individual companies or the industry as a whole chose at any time in the future to institute and implement a rating system of any kind.

— Stephen R. Bissette

"When it comes to sex — I tell ya,

ADULT CONTENT: WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

The hottest issue in the comics industry today is censorship (though many industry representatives balk at that term). Whether you call it ratings, self-policing or labelling, it still boils down to the same thing — censorship, which my handy Webster's Dictionary defines as the judgement of manuscripts for publication.

Much of the friction generated by this issue stems from the fact that nobody seems to agree on what purpose a ratings system would serve. Ask any five people this question and you're likely to get five completely different answers.

Why enact a ratings system? To protect retailers from getting busted? To meet a moral obligation to comics buyers? Should such a system impose the same standards in Savannah as in San Francisco? Will it merely serve the purpose of knuckling under to "moral majority" crackpots? Might it signal the beginning of a new McCarthyism? Or is it just another case of comics being five years behind the times, reacting to the country's move to

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you know, the town goes crazy."

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the right at a time when the pendulum of public opinion has already begun swinging in the opposite direction?

*This past November, top publishers and distributors got together with retailers from all over the US and Canada at the Star*Reach Tradeshow in Chicago to discuss these very questions. Since then, DC Comics has announced their own ratings system, and certain top creators, in turn, have announced that — after current contracts expire — they will refuse to work for any comics publisher with a ratings system.*

*The Star*Reach seminar — Mature Content: Whose Responsibility? — is reproduced here, in the hopes that it will cause you to consider this controversial question very carefully. It should be made clear that some industry representatives interpreted advertising for this issue to mean that we pulled a "candid camera" trick by recording a closed seminar. At no time have we meant to give the impression that the following discussion was closed for any reason to the public. Indeed, an announcement was made at the start that the seminar was being taped for publication, although for various reasons some participants may have missed it. Sorry for the confusion, folks. I think we all agree this is a topic for the widest possible open discussion...*

— Mark Borax

AUDIENCE: This is all relating to pornography in comic books — is that correct?
MARK BORAX (Moderator): *Well, the subject is really Questionable Content; Whose Responsibility? I'd like to stress that we haven't decided that it's pornography as such.*
GARY COLABUONO (Retailer: Moondog Comics): Let me start off by saying that I'm a proponent of a rating system. I know there are lots of publishers, distributors and retailers who aren't, okay? I think it would be an excellent idea. I have problems with it, but I think it would immediately give the retailer, distributor and publisher common ground to work from. I even have a small scenario that I can put together for you, okay? It's a very simple system but, at the same time, what it gives us is an opportunity to all work from the same points of reference. In the past, the idea of a rating system was, uh, what's "R" in New York is "X" in Tuscaloosa, and what's a "G" in — I mean, you have that problem. I would like to throw out to you guys not so much what my rating system is as what people think of a rating system, why they think they should have it. I can tell you why *I* think they should — and that is, it gives us common ground. We would know immediately what we are ordering and what we are selling.
AUDIENCE: I'm not against it. That sounds like an excellent idea.
AUDIENCE: I'd like to hear it!
AUDIENCE: Yeah, elaborate on your system, Gary.
GARY: It's an A-B-C system, okay? And when I say it's simple, I'm saying that we oughtta know what the common groundwork is. There's always gonna be some gray area to everything, okay? But an "A" is a comic that does not deal with mature adult themes — your G.I. JOE, this month's issue of SPIDER-MAN, the Star comics. I don't know if there's ever been

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"A rating system would make our job easier."

an Epic comic — except GROO, for instance — that's an "A" comic. The "B" comic, which is adult themes, it might even be this month's SPIDER-MAN. Or might have been last month's SPIDER-MAN. It could be most of the Epic comics. There would be no graphic violence, such as severed heads and limbs. There would, of course, be action and adventure and violence that is necessary. And then "C" would be any type of fornication, actual sexual depiction and nudity. Specifically, bare breasts, pubic hair.

This is a very simple system. You can name any single comic and I can tell you where it would fall immediately. You tell me **Frank Miller's** DAREDEVIL — I tell you "B." Some specific **Frank Miller** DAREDEVILs could be "C." ELEKTRA could be "B," could be "C," if there's any actual nudity, okay? We would all know this, we would all have something to work on. Now this is the simple scenario — go ahead and tell me the problems.

AUDIENCE: What would you do if you had a kid that's twelve or thirteen years old, collecting DAREDEVIL, and all of a sudden one of the issues that he's trying to collect falls into a "C"?

GARY: Well, this is the publisher's responsibility. I've been on record as saying this is a publisher's responsibility — and that we're at their mercy 'cause they're publishing the comics. It would be their responsibility to keep a consistent situation. I mean, we all know about the MIRACLEMAN #9 — I mean, this is an obvious mistake. But I don't want to say that this is an infallible thing. What I want to hear from everyone is, give me some real major problems with this. I can tell you one major problem, right off the bat. As a responsbile retailer, where do I stock these in my store? If I'm alphabetical, A - Z, and I have an "A" comic right next to a "C," is that responsible? I don't know. I don't think so. But let me know what you think.

AUDIENCE: You're basically proposing something like a motion-picture rating system.

GARY: No —

AUDIENCE: Without the ages, of course.

GARY: Yes, right.

AUDIENCE: But the way that they're rated, as I understand, is that there's a board who rates them. What you're proposing is that each publisher would rate his own comic, so it seems to me that Eclipse's "B" is not gonna be the same as Marvel's "B," is not gonna be the same as Rip-Off's "B."

GARY: I don't see that as a problem, in that there are strict limitations.

JIM FRIEL (Sales Manager of Eclipse Comics): I think there's more room, perhaps, for misinterpretation and misunderstanding than you think in the system you just proposed. From what I heard you describe, I would call **Frank Miller's** DAREDEVILs, which you used as examples, either "A" or "B," not either "B" or "C." Right away, first example, we have a disagreement.

CAROL KALISH (Sales Manager of Marvel Comics): I would call them almost always "A"! Because there are no severed heads and there are no severed limbs.

GARY: There's no reason for it to be a "C" if it had severed limbs, for instance — but it definitely is a "B"!

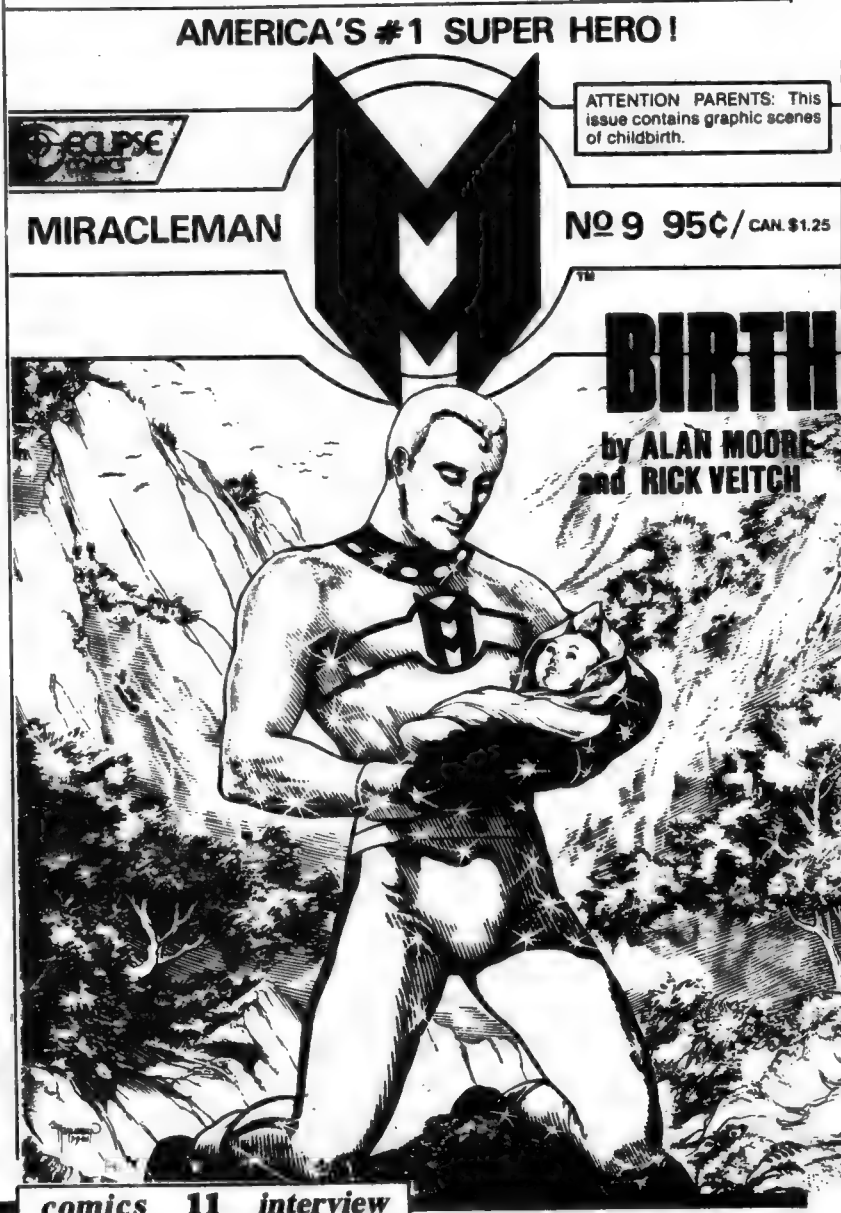
JIM FRIEL: You said you thought some would be "Cs."

CAROL: But what's your definition of "C" if it is not severed limbs?

GARY: Specifically, the scenes where, whatever you call those three-pronged —

CAROL: So graphic violence, as well as nudity, gets a "C"?

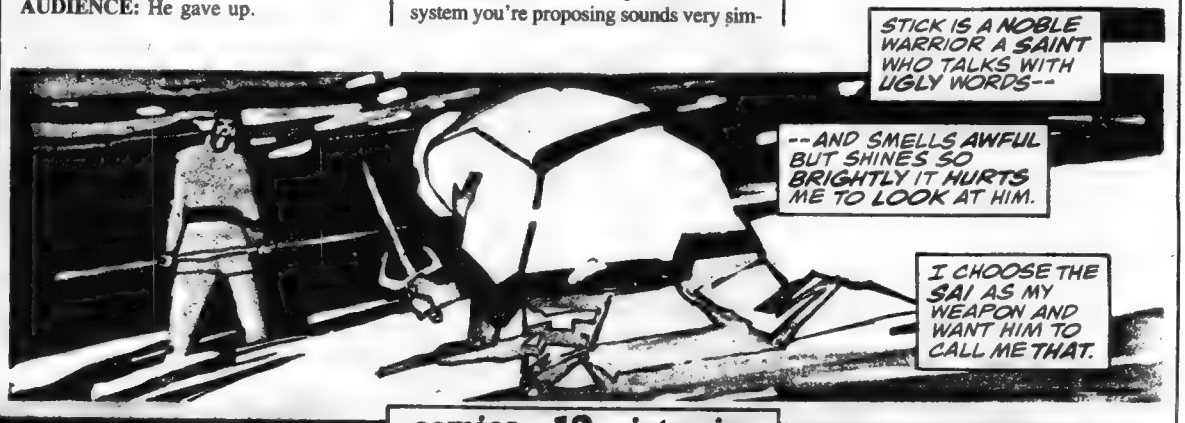
Eclipse's advisory notice on this cover did little to offset the furor Alan Moore's story caused. (Turn to Milton Griepp's interview for his interpretation of the panic.)


AMERICA'S #1 SUPER HERO!
ATTENTION PARENTS: This issue contains graphic scenes of childbirth.
ECLIPSE COMIC
MIRACLEMAN
№ 9 95¢/ CAN. $1.25
BIRTH
by ALAN MOORE and RICK VEITCH

© 1986 John Totleben

"I find the idea highly offensive."

EVERYONE: *(Laughter.)*
GARY: Yeah. I just want everybody to understand that what I'm proposing is a simple, simple answer. And there are no simple answers.
MARK: *I think we understood your proposal, and I think Carol wanted to finish her point.*
CAROL: What you're setting are very, very simple, rigorous standards — and what I'm pointing out is that the standard you're proposing is not simple, because all of a sudden there's another element. Are there other elements?
GARY: You guys are all misunderstanding what I'm saying. It's a *simple* system, and there are no simple answers. What I'm saying is that, if we started with some system, it could be honed and refined to something we all understand. I think that a publisher, especially like Marvel, may *want* a "B" rating for their comics instead of an "A" rating, in certain situations. They're trying to appeal to a certain age group with some of their comics. There are no simple answers, okay? But it's a start.
MARK: *Let's take some more questions.*
AUDIENCE: Has a publisher ever been sued? A distributor ever been sued? A retailer ever been sued or arrested?
AUDIENCE: Retailers have been closed. There was a situation, I can't remember his name — Gary, you know the story.
GARY: Well, I don't think that's a good example.
AUDIENCE: He gave up.
JIM FRIEL: It's the only example we know of.
GARY: What it's a good example of, I guess, is a community's understanding of what a comics shop is. If you ask anybody off the street what a comic-book store is, they say it's a place where kids go.
MILTON GRIEPP (Capital City Distribution): And I think the situation here in Chicago — where that store closed — demonstrates that what we're dealing with is not necessarily *law*, but more public opinion. There are very well-organized groups who make it their business to look at what retailers sell on their shelves — the most recent national example being 7-Eleven pulling PLAYBOY and PENTHOUSE. That was the result of a very small, well-organized group who got a lot of attention.
AUDIENCE: *(Woman stands up with front page of newspaper.)* And here they go again: they're targeting video stores with X-rated films. It's a church group. They put pressure in our area on 7-Elevens and Mini-Marts, and you know what they did? They put their racks out in front and said "See — we're getting rid of it!"
AUDIENCE: In the Cincinnati area, they're pulling rock magazines off.
MILTON: That was another, more extreme, example of some offhanded comment of **Jimmy Swaggart** that caused Wallmart to pull its forty rock'n'roll titles off their racks, and a lot of records by some recording artists.
JIM FRIEL: I think, the point is, that this system you're proposing sounds very simple, Gary, but in fact, you would find that it's far more subjective than you think.
GARY: I'm certain it is, but —
JIM FRIEL: I mean, I find the idea highly offensive in some ways.
MILTON: I would like to make a comment on the violence issue, which is that the groups which are looking at the kind of material that is sold in public places are much more interested in sex than they are in violence. And I think that our initial attention should be focused in that direction, because I personally find violence much more offensive, but the groups out there that are well organized and picketing, writing letters and so on, are much more concerned about sex.
MARK: *Okay, let's field some comments.*
AUDIENCE: One thing that I think needs to be clarified — are we talking about a rating system that is offered for the distributors and retailers, or is some kid off the street gonna know that this is an "A" comic, this is a "B" comic? 'Cause if we're talking at that level, it seems that we're opening up a whole different can of worms. We'll have parents complaining, "Why is this store carrying material that they openly acknowledge to be "B" or "C" content? "
GARY: Yes, in fact, this was the biggest problem that I had. As I mentioned, if you rack alphabetically, as most of us do, and you have a "C" that's next to an "A," how does one justify that?
MARK: *I think Gary was proposing that*


STICK IS A NOBLE WARRIOR A SAINT WHO TALKS WITH UGLY WORDS--
--AND SMELLS AWFUL BUT SHINES SO BRIGHTLY IT HURTS ME TO LOOK AT HIM.
I CHOOSE THE SAI AS MY WEAPON AND WANT HIM TO CALL ME THAT.

© 1986 MCG

"I don't have a problem with violence."

the rating be printed on the cover — right Gary?

GARY: Right, it would be on the cover, what I'm looking for is common ground. Another problem I have with all these discussions: most distributors I talk to are in favor of some system, most retailers I talk to are in favor of some system, but *NO* publishers are in favor of this. Now, I don't understand that. I can understand some publishers being against it and some for it — but I have not talked to one publisher who favors something like this.

MARK: *There's a woman in the back who's had her hand up for some time.*

AUDIENCE: I don't know as I'd be real happy if someone else decided "A," "B" and "C" for me. What I'd like to do is have somebody tell me, "Look carefully at these ones!"

JIM FRIEL: You're proposing that this would be the distributor's responsibility?

AUDIENCE: I don't know if they have the time.

JIM FRIEL: There's no one else in the system who handles all the books, though.

AUDIENCE: I think it's up to the publishers to make us retailers aware of what's inside their books — whether it be sex, violence or whatever. Now, I don't have any problem with violence. It's when it comes to sex — I tell ya, you know, the town goes crazy over it. I think it's the publisher's duty that if that book has sex in it, dealing with nudity or what have you — it should be made known to us. And if it isn't made known to us, we can return that book.

JIM FRIEL: We label our books, when we believe there is anything out of the ordinary enough to require a judgement call on the part of the retailer. TALES OF TERROR and ALIEN ENCOUNTERS always carry a "For Mature Readers" tag, somewhere in the top third of the cover.

JIM NELSON (Art Director of Hot Comics): I think the reason that some publishers, a number of publishers, would be against that, is that in cases where nudity is published, adult material can be handled with a positive rather than negative effect.

JIM FRIEL: It's not fair, really, to retailers to allow them to think that there is nothing that anyone might object to in a book where, in fact, there is.

AUDIENCE: But don't you think a rating system would get a lot of comics out of back rooms and back on the shelves, because they would be properly labelled, and you could count on your own customers dividing themselves up? They are finding out, as you say, the hard way! And you're censoring yourself right now! Publishers are printing, and getting books all the way through the system, with no information for anybody, and it takes about three days after it hits your stores until it's not even one the shelves anymore. It's in the back room and we're all really, really mad. It might be more satisfying to have a "C" rating on it, to have an opportunity to take a look at it, put it on the shelf. You'd get the chance for your customers to be forewarned about what you're gonna do. Right now, I see books in the back room all the time. How many of you have books that you bought that are not on open display in your store? It's gotta be, like, every shop, right? You can't sell a book if you're not displaying it!

GARY: We all want to carry all the products, because this is what separates us from being a newsstand — what separates us from being a used-book store. We carry *all* the comics, and we feel that as long as there are people out there who want to buy, let's say, adult comics, or mature comics — even though that audience may not be large — we feel a responsibility to these people. They're our customers. We want to carry this product, but I find it real

© 1986 Scott Hampton

"WATCHMEN and ELEKTRA have been the

hard to justify policemen coming into my store with complaints 'cause I'm selling obscene material. I don't like it. I don't want it. It's easier for me to control, if I knew ahead of time what I was ordering and, when it came in the door, exactly what it would be. A lot easier.

AUDIENCE: I was just wondering if we could have a show of hands if there have been complaints lodged in your stores. *(About three or four hands go up, out of sixty.)* Somebody mentioned here that the best thing is information from the distributors to the retailers to advise them to keep the young buyers away. I believe that sales figures, the way things are targeted, it's pretty obvious which books have mature content — isn't that enough?

AUDIENCE: I don't think it's that obvious.

MILTON: It's not obvious. In the case of MIRACLEMAN #9, which has been a fairly violent book, it's never had anything approaching what —

AUDIENCE: Yeah! Yes! Yeah!

RETAILER: I may be in a little different position than some people here, because my store is in a college town, and we put everything on the stands. The problem that I have is that I want there to be comic books for an adult audience 'cause that's mainly who I'm selling to. But if you walk into a bookstore, you can tell what books are for kids, what books are Harlequin-type books, what books are science fiction. If you walk into a comic-book store, which should have books for eight-year-olds, and books for thirty-year-olds, you can't tell by looking at 'em. Some of 'em look like kiddy books and they're *not* kiddy books! I'm not sure that a rating system would work, but I don't know what else would. In a bookstore, it's the packaging. But a lot of the new comic publishers aren't sophisticated enough, I don't think, to package a book so that it looks like —

GARY: That's a good point.

RETAILER: One thing I've done since this panic set in is, we single-bag every mature comic that we put on the shelf. It's more expensive, time-consuming, but that way my employees know that anything that's in a bag that's brand new is cautionary.

GARY: And your customers know, too.

AUDIENCE: No, my customers still try — they figure that I'm just giving away free bags.

EVERYONE: *(Laughter.)*

GARY: You're just not informing them properly. We do the same thing, Joe, but our customers know why it's in a bag.

RETAILER: So what you're doing is — you're providing the packaging.

OH, DAN.
NO, LISTEN, IT'S NOT JUST THE WAR OR THE FACT I'M EMOTIONALLY CHURNED UP RIGHT NOW...
IT'S THIS MASK KILLER THING... I MEAN SERIOUSLY: BLAKE DEAD, JON EXILED, ADRIAN SHOT AT, RORSCHACH CAPTURED...
I CAN JUST FEEL THIS ANXIETY, THIS TERROR BEARING DOWN...
I CAME DOWN HERE FOR MY COSTUME... I DUNNO, I FEEL WORRIED, CONFUSED. I JUST NEED TO TAKE THE AIR, TO BLOW AWAY THE COBWEBS. I...
AHH, HELL...
WELL, I GUESS I MUST LOOK PRETTY DEVO, RIGHT?
HA HA HA!
AHH, YOU'RE RIGHT. IT'S A STUPID, MID-LIFE CRISIS KIND OF IDEA. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT I WAS PLANNING TO DO.
MAYBE TAKE THE SHIP OUT OR SOMETHING, GET MYSELF STRAIGHT...
SO? WHO'S TO KNOW?
WHAT?
WHO'S TO KNOW? YOU SAID IT'S RADAR INVISIBLE
YES, BUT...
LISTEN, YOU GET THE REST OF YOUR SUIT ON WHILE I GO GET DRESSED
I USED TO BE A MASKED AVENGER TOO, REMEMBER.
I MEAN, I'M USED TO GOING OUT AT THREE IN THE MORNING AND DOING SOMETHING STUPID.
20

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GARY: Yes, our customers know that if it's in a bag, and it's on the new comics shelf, then you gotta be eighteen to buy it.

JIM FRIEL: They also know that they can't open a bag without ID.

GARY: Yes, there are signs posted.

AUDIENCE: I'd be interested to find out what kind of reaction there's been to the PG rating on GRENDEL. I really don't know how to handle that. I don't know where to draw the line on a PG.

GARY: I'm pretty sure we didn't bag GRENDEL.

AUDIENCE: Gary, I was in one of your shops the other day, and I bought the latest issue of THE WATCHMEN, and I don't remember it being in a bag.

GARY: No, we didn't bag the WATCHMEN, either. WATCHMEN and ELEKTRA have been the biggest problems we're had. Some of 'em had to be baged, some of 'em we didn't wanna bag. We don't wanna bag *any* of 'em. Because of the quality of the series, we wanted to get it out there and not restrict it to fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. If you're under eighteen you don't get it, if it's in a bag in our stores.

AUDIENCE: You did bag some WATCHMEN?

GARY: No, we haven't bagged any

biggest problems we had. We bagged some."

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WATCHMEN. We bagged some ELEKTRAs.

MARK: *Okay, a question from the fellow in the back.*

RETAILER: Ultimately, it's your responsibility for the product you sell in your store. In turn, your relationship to the community. If you're in a very religious community, if you're a smart business-person, you're not going to put product out there which is going to cause you problems. That's just basic common sense. I'm not so sure we need a rating system, as much as information about the titles that come in, so that we're not surprised when the mother calls up and says "My God — did you see what you sold my son!" I think it's better if we have the information beforehand, so that we can at least be prepared when we put the books on the rack, to police them properly, to make sure they're sold to the proper audience. I'm not so sure a rating system would do it. A rating system would make our job easier, because we wouldn't have to think whether they're "A," "B" or "C" but, nonetheless, ultimately it's your responsibility as shop-owner to be careful what you sell to whom.

MILTON: To the extent that the law is involved here, obscenity statutes do assume that everyone who handles the book knows the contents. The landmark case on that issue involved ZAP #4, in the mid-'70s in New York City, and the retailer said, "Well, I put it out on the rack, I didn't know what it was." A kid got hold of it and the ruling there was that the retailer had a responsibility for everything on his racks. I think the publishers have a *moral* responsibility to let everyone in the distribution chain know what's in it, but the *legal* responsibility does fall on the retailer, as well as the distributor.

RETAILER: The real problem with a rating system, I think we're seen a lot with the movie-rating system. The system works, yes, but you have kids that decide it's an R-rated movie, so that's why I want to see it! More importantly to the comics retailer is — putting that rating on focuses attention. With the kids, in part — but more with the parents! "Why are you handling that kind of material?"

OTHER RETAILER: The answer to that is because it's not a kid's store — it's a comic-book store! The point is, you're putting a spotlight on it when you put a rating on it. I wish I could remember the quote, but the bottom line is that if you're protecting freedom — and what we're talking about is the freedom to be able to make adult material available to adults — it's not gonna be easy. You have to work at freedom. That's why I think the best system of dealing with this is for the publishers to make the information available, the distributors to pass it on to the retailers, and the retailers to make that information available in a discreet manner, screening the material, to keep it out of the hands of kids.

JIM FRIEL: So you're not only opposed to a rating system, but you're also opposed to all cover labelling, which would tend to warn off kids?

RETAILER: I mean, cover labelling is a discretionary thing. But it's more important that the lines of communication be opened. We need the information from the publishers, to go through the distributors to the retailers.

GARY: Is your contention, "Let's not open a can of worms"? Because, if it is, I think that can's been opened! For a long time. I can't believe the things that are happening in our country right now, as far as a swing to the Right. I never believed it could happen, and I think that if we were doing our own policing we'd be much better off.

RETAILER: I think where we stand now is on the tip of the iceberg, and handling it in a rational, mature matter, we can keep it from getting to the kind of —

"You're not dealing with rational,

NEXT EVENING...
"... AS PART OF THE MAYOR'S NEW 'CRUSADE AGAINST VICE.' LOCAL RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE PLEDGING THEIR SUPPORT TO THE CRACKDOWN ON NUDE DANCING AND PORNOGRAPHY — WHICH HAS ALREADY RESULTED IN THE CLOSING OF A DOZEN LOCAL CLUBS... ".
WHAT KIND OF BUZZARD VOMIT IS THIS?
I'LL GET IT.
RRRING! RING!
WE'RE OUTA BIZNESS, SWEETIE! THIS WHOLE BLOCK HAS BEEN RE-ZONED "RESIDENTIAL!" I GOT A WEEK TO CLEAR OUT.
... IT WAS NICE KNOWIN' YA, KID.
LET'S GO.
© 1981 Reed Waller

"In other areas, OMAHA can't be displayed at all," says Capital City's Milton Griepp. You can get it, though, from Kitchen Sink Press. By Reed Waller and Kate Worley.

GARY: Yeah, but you're not dealing with rational, mature people — you gotta remember that. When people come into your store and they're upset because you're selling something pornographic, you cannot reason with them.

JIM FRIEL: You can't give in to them, either.

GARY: No, I agree. Please, I'm not advocating any censorship.

JIM FRIEL: I know, you want us to be able to cover ourselves.

RETAILER: If you've got a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old coming into your store and buying issues #1 through #8, you gonna tell him that he can't buy MIRACLEMAN #9? But you can buy #10 through however many they run? If a book is going to be something adult in content, but "Gee, willickers — we left out the T&A this issue, folks," it's still a good book — great! I don't mind that. But you can't do the exact opposite.

OTHER RETAILER: It's the publisher's reponsibility to keep it consistent.

GARY: That was one of the things mentioned in Las Vegas, when there were some chainstore owners who met with the distributors. That was the one thing on which we were all in agreement — to get the publishers to all be consistent.

OTHER RETAILER: If we get enough advance info, then we can decide whether to carry it or not.

RICK OBADIAH (Publisher of First Comics): If a publisher is not consistent, or has a poor track record, if they throw something at you that's not what was solicited — send it back. If the publisher won't take it back, send it to your distributor. If a publisher is unreliable, doesn't give you proper ordering information, and jeopardizes your store — shut the publisher down! Don't order his books. And don't come screaming that, "You keep screwing me by sending me books I can't sell!" Don't buy 'em! You gotta know the products you sell. The law says, and Milton says, that you're responsible. You've gotta look at the material. If the material is not what you thought, not what you were led to believe — send it back! And if the publisher says he's not taking it — don't take anything else from the publisher. Take your stand. Take responsibility for your actions. A publisher sitting in Chicago has no concept of what an "A," "B," "C" rating, or what the morality is gonna be in Miami Beach. We don't know. Marvel sits in New York, they have no idea what the standard is in Arlington Heights. We don't know. We put out a consistent product, and we try to sell it. And you get a track record. If a publisher screws you, screw him back! Close me down if I've done it to you! And I really mean it. Take responsiblity for what you're carrying. And don't rely on a rating system, because that rating system will be fallible. That rating system will get you into more trouble. If your problem is sexual material, let your distributor know. At an earlier meeting, publishers were asked to give you more information. First Comics gives you the information! Most publishers tell you *exactly* what's in a book. If you don't like what's in the book — we'll find out, when you don't order it! A rating system is always gonna be judged by community standards. You've chosen a rating system in your store, Gary, which is consistent with your community. I love your idea of putting what you're not sure about into a plastic bag. A book like WATCHMEN may not go into a plastic bag in Chicago, but it may go into a plastic bag somewhere else. You, Gary, as a store owner, don't need a rating system! You created one yourself, which seems to be a very smart way for you to do business. You, yourself, have come up with an answer to a problem, that isn't a blanket answer that has to be applied to everybody, just your stores. If you think there's not enough information, or if you think a publisher is sending you something that you can't work with — send it back!

MILTON: I think the idea of a rating system has merit, if it is made as objective as possible, so the variations in community standards that Rick was talking about can be met. For example, in Greenwich Village, a retailer can display OMAHA and WATCHMEN and ELEKTRA as a similar product that sells to a similar audience. Although I'm sure he doesn't sell it to children. In other areas, OMAHA can't be displayed at all. The retailer and distributor need to know what the content of the book is. Is there any nudity at all? If there's any nudity at all, then the publisher has the responsibility to notify the distributor and the retailers. Once you know what's in it, then you can react to that by deciding whether to buy it and, when you buy it, how to display it, and who to sell it to.

MARK BORAX: *The woman in the back.*

WOMAN: As a practical solution to not having to put stuff in the back room, I have a box. OMAHA goes in the box as a back issue the day it comes into the store.

mature people — remember that."

GEORGE, WHAT'S HAPPENING? THE PAPERS SAY EVERYBODY'S BEING CLOSED DOWN!
UH... SOMEBODY HAS DECIDED TO "CLEAN UP" THE TOWN, KID. OUR KIND OF BUSINESS IS "NO LONGER WELCOME—"
... LOOK, I REALLY GOTTA GO NOW!..
WHO WAS IT?
KITTY CORNER'S CLOSED — I'M OUT OF WORK!
"PICKETING IN FRONT OF THE VENUS BOOK STORE..."

RETAILER: The problem with that system is — you don't move as much product. If I placed OMAHA in a box behind the counter, and relied on people seeing this little list on my bulletin board, I'm gonna sell a tenth of what I could.

MARK: *There seems to be a consensus, at least, in wanting more communication from the publisher.*

GARY: There's one thing, too, that was brought up before — know your community and know what's going on within it. One of the best things you can do is to become involved with your community, and become perceived as being an important part of your community. Our stores have always strived to do certain things that are looked upon as being positive influences for young adults and children in our areas. Generally, they can be very inexpensive, even so much as sponsoring one of the soccer teams or a football team in the park district — Little League, things of this sort. You immediately put a lot of people at ease that you are not some smut dealer/pornographer/profit merchant. These are things that I encourage everybody to get involved in, in their immediate area. Especially with the library. Get involved, donate books, comics, paperbacks, donate slow-moving children's items, anything that is positive for children. You'll immediately take a lot of heat off yourself.

MILTON: We had a good example in Texas, which is a fairly conservative area — in Houston there was a Parents and Teachers Association that had taken a real negative stand towards comics. They'd said it was an official P.T.A. feeling that comics were not appropriate for children. He did a project with the local P.T.A., he bought remaindered books from us. They were doing some fund-raising thing with kids, selling candy or something to raise money for some project — and the reward for the kids was comics. Obviously, he screened them carefully to make sure they were all appropriate for any age, and he turned that situation from a negative to a positive one. Gary's very right, local activism, in a positive way, can be real productive.

GARY: You can defuse a situation before it even happens, you know, and that's what you want to do. We never turn down any school that asks for a donation. Never turn down a mother's group, any of these kind of organizations. If you just show that you're involved, it might be the one thing that'll keep'em off your back.

RETAILER: We're right behind a junior high, and a lot of these kids will come in and try to sneak some of these books. They know they can't get 'em past me. Once they know that, they don't try it anymore. But if you put a code on there, that they know it's for an adult — that's gonna put a red flag on there, and if they aren't gonna get it one way, they're gonna shoplift.

JIM FRIEL: So you think it would make the situation worse to have a rating system?

RETAILER: I think it would.

OTHER RETAILER: Yeah.

JIM FRIEL: What about the advisories Eclipse is putting on TALES OF TERROR right now, for instance? Do you think those serve that function?

LIBERALISM IS DEAD.
PRACTICALLY OVERNIGHT.
"...MAYOR SPOTZ WAS HONORED LAST NIGHT AT A DINNER HOSTED BY THE 'CITIZENS FOR MORAL DECENCY...'"
TIME TO GO TO SAN FRANCISCO!
ARE YOU KIDDING! WE HAVEN'T GOT ENOUGH MONEY TO MAKE IT TO SIOUX FALLS!
— FUCKING MAYOR — ONE OF MY BIGGEST FANS!
$?
"...ARE PROPOSING A LOCAL BUREAU OF MEDIA STANDARDS..."

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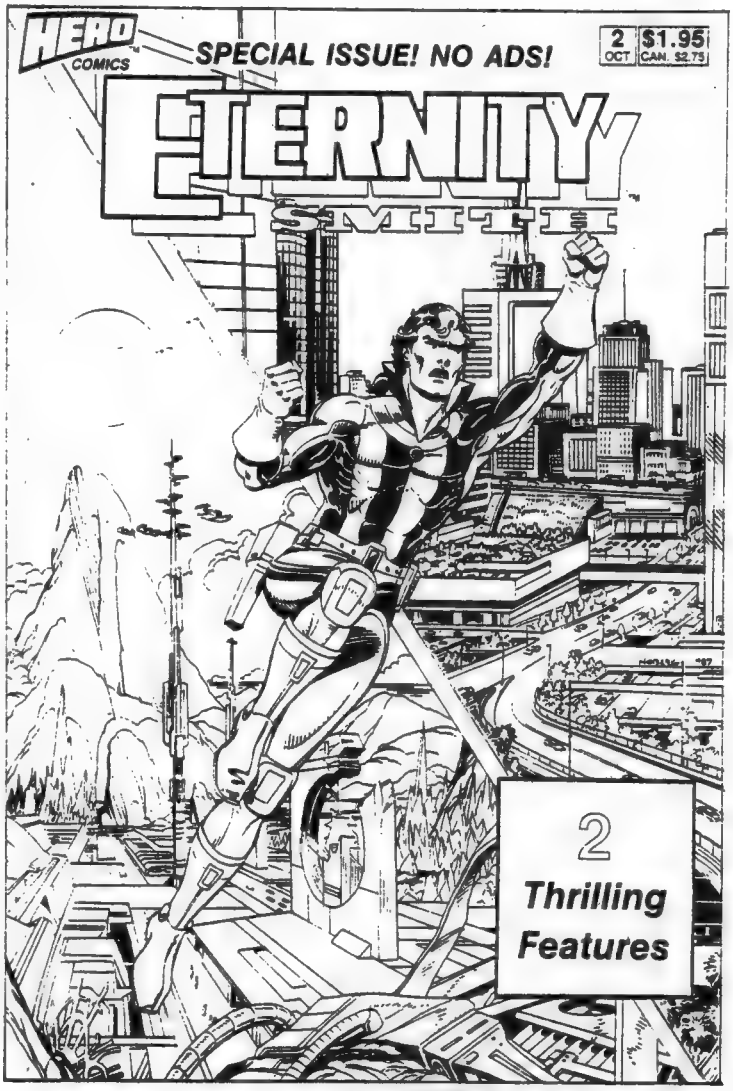
32 pages of story! No ads!



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In the aftermath of the events that concluded in the first issue of this series, an important agency of the Federal government has learned about the futuristic technology *Eternity Smith* has at his command. The agency *wants* it, and is willing to do *anything* to get it.

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. . . . . & Chuck Patton
Artwork . . . . . E. R. Cruz
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E. R. CRUZ becomes the regular inker on *ETERNITY SMITH*, adding his own special brand of elegance to co-creator ***RICK HOBERG's*** dynamic pencils.

"Don't give in to this kind of pressure."

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RETAILER: Yes, it does.
JIM FRIEL: It attracts them?
RETAILER: Yes. But they know that I'm not gonna let 'em buy one.
JIM FRIEL: Does it help *you* to identify the book?
RETAILER: Yes, it helps a lot. I wish more were that way.
MARK: *Mike Smith?*
MIKE: I think Gary has the best solution to the problem — working with the community. Because if somebody comes in and they're out to get you, they're gonna find some way to get you, and if it's in a bag or it's labelled, they're gonna seize it for some kind of evidence, and they're gonna say, "Hey, listen — I don't care if it's labelled or not! This is out there, the kids can look at it! They're taking PLAYBOY out of 7-Elevens so people can't look at just the cover! For seven years, I sold the most outrageous pornography, gallery exhibitions by **S. Clay Wilson,** porno art shows *(laughter from crowd),* and in seven years, all we got was a mother complaining about some Paper Moon greeting cards we carried. We donated a lot of material to the local Catholic church, civic groups and such, and a couple of times Father Murphy would call me up and say "Mike — we had a complaint from some mother," and he'd field the complaints for me. I worked with the P.T.A., the library. Heidi-Ho Comics worked very well with everybody. Unfortunately, what happened a couple of months ago at Heidi-Ho, was somebody came in and pointed to a book behind the counter, way up on a shelf, and asked the clerk, "Is this a girl or is this a woman?" and he said, "I dunno — looks like a girl to me," and she read a complaint to the P.T.A. that we were selling kiddie porn!
EVERYBODY: *(Laughter and Gasps.)*
MIKE: It was a set-up. She'd never even been in Heidi-Ho before — she was out to find something in the store and make a stand about it. You have to watch it. Legally, they can't do anything — they can't prosecute for kiddie porn, since it's not. The problem is really the peer pressure, and you're gonna have to find some way to excuse it or prevent it before it happens.
MARK: *Good point.* (Nods at retailer.) *Yes?*
AUDIENCE: Another thing you've got to do, if you take the stand that the material you're selling is acceptable to that age group, and your help is competent — make sure that they don't sell a copy of QUADRANT to a four-year-old! Don't give in when you get this kind of pressure because — *(looks at Milton on the podium)* speaking as a generic distributor — will any distributors stand behind the material that they're selling?
MILTON: Stand behind it? What do you mean?
AUDIENCE: If a QUADRANT is sold to a four-year-old, and obviously it's not meant to be going to that person.
MILTON: It was labelled and solicited as an adult book — it was the retailer's clerk who made the mistake.
AUDIENCE: Right. But if it's sold to an eighteen- or twenty-one-year old, and they're saying that this is pornographic material, et cetera, would the distributor stand behind it? And say, "This is designed for the adult market?"
MILTON: This one would.
RETAILER: It would be safe to say, as a rule — you know all the distributors — that they would stand behind their product?
MILTON: Some would, some probably wouldn't.
RETAILER: What about the publishers?
JIM FRIEL: I think every publisher would stand behind his own product to that extent.
OTHER RETAILER: I'm not sure what you mean by "stand behind"?
MILTON: Help with legal fees, and that kind of thing? I think some publishers have been through this before — for example, with the underground comics which came out in the '70s. There was a period when those were very, very hot, being sold through record stores, head shops and, in some cases, newsstands and bookstores, and those publishers got involved in a number of lawsuits. Some cases, even the printers were involved in actions brought by local district attorneys. For example, Port Publications, which prints a lot of publications, such as Fantagraphics', in Wisconsin, was involved in a case in the '70s. They got donations from the Playboy Foundation; there are national groups also that support this kind of battle. So it was a clearcut case which was handled responsibly by the retailer, based on a local law that could be deemed unconstitutional — I think there's support over there. As a distributor, I would say we could conduit that support. Our ability to contribute would probably be limited, because a lot of those cases go to very high levels, they go to the Supreme Court, or whatever. But there are groups out there: People for the American Way is another one, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Playboy Foundation, come to mind off the top of my head. They donate money or provide legal counsel for stores that get in this kind of situation — where it was

SWAMP THING — one of the few newsstand comics in 30 years to reject the Comics Code Authority.

"Can the publishers tell me why

THE FIRST TIME THE FIRST TIME I THOUGHT ABOUT SOMEBODY EATING PART OF YOU I...
WILL... I THREW UP
BUT IF THIS IS LIKE SOMETHING THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE TO DO
WILL... OKAY
UH...
RIGHT. HERE GOES.
MMLF
S'GREAT
S'LIKE A SORT OF PERFUME TASTE LIKE CARDAMOM...
THIS IS REALLY GOOD
YOU WANTED TO DO THIS AS LIKE A SYMBOLIC THING?
NOT ENTIRELY...
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
IS THERE SOMETHING ELSE I SHOULD HAVE
UH
ALEC...?
ALEC. EVERYTHING LOOKS SORT OF
STRANGE
WOW... DO YOU MEAN "STRANGE"...?
ALEC?
ALEC... I...
OH
OHHH...

Will DC creators always have the freedom to portray sex and altered consciousness as profoundly as Moore, Bissette and Tottleben did in SWAMP THING #34?

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handled responsibly, labelled correctly, sold to an adult, and a violation of an obscentiy statute was brought against the retailer.

RETAILER: It depends on what the case is. If somebody came in, purchased a book as an adult and said, "This is obscenity," my first question would be, "Prove that it's obscene!"

OTHER RETAILER: My first thing would be to call my lawyer!

EVERYBODY: *(Laughter.)*

RETAILER: Mine would be to call the publisher's lawyer! He's gonna stand as much heat as we are!

GARY: Can the publishers tell me, and us, why they're against a rating system?

JIM FRIEL: We're opposed to a rating system for basically two reasons, two sets of reasons. First, we don't believe that any sort of a commonly-subscribed-to rating system could be completely objective, completely uniform, completely agreed-upon in all places at all times. Secondly, we're made very uncomfortable by a rating system which would assign — and I've never heard a proposal for any that would not — the same kind of rating to sexual behavior as it does to extreme violence. Which are at opposite poles, as far as Eclipse is concerned. I don't see that depicting fornication, however dangerous it may be politically, should be considered the same sort of thing as depicting graphic torture. And Eclipse would certainly not participate in anything which tended to lump them together.

MARK: *Could we hear from Marvel's Carol Kalish on that?*

CAROL: Marvel does not espouse a rating system because we don't think it's necessary. Our books currently carry a cover marking — the Comics Code seal — which tips the retailer off as to the relative sophistication of the comics' contents. If the Code does not appear on the book, then the retailer can read that as an indication that he should check the book's contents prior to putting it out on the shelves. The retailer can then make a decision on how to display and sell the book, given his local standards and personal beliefs. Gary, for example, might bag copies of ELEKTRA. A New York City retailer probably wouldn't feel he had to bag those copies.

In addition, I feel that we give the retailer a very accurate description of the contents of our books through our order form. We make sure that you're aware of content problems, be it language, nudity, violence, or something else. It's again up to you, the retailer, to decide who the customer is for a book — an eighteen year old, a five year old, or a teenager — and decide how many copies you need to service those customers. A cover rating won't help you do that; information on your order form does.

I'd like to point out here that if we botch our description, and a book's content is different enough from what we claimed it would be and it can't be displayed the way you thought it could be, we'll take it back. We'll give full returns. You won't be stuck with copies sitting in your back rooms.

MILTON: The problem without the cover marking, though, is that the retailer may have been well informed when the book was ordered as to what the contents were, and he might think, "Okay, I can sell fifty copies of this 'cause I can sell it to these fifty adult customers," but when it comes down to the clerk who's checking the stuff out — if a ten-year-old wants to buy it and there's no marking on the cover, and the

they're against a rating system — ?"

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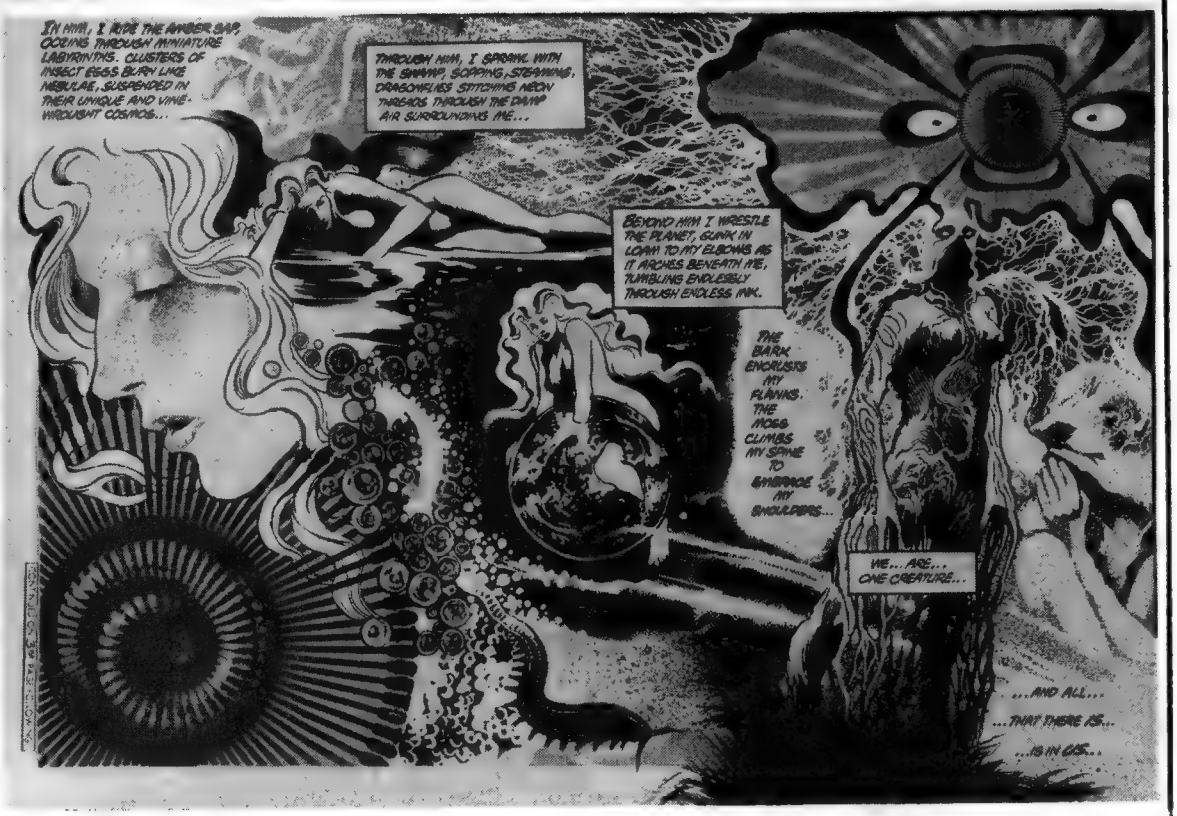
IN HIM, I RIDE THE AMBER SAP, COILING THROUGH MINIATURE LABYRINTHS. CLUSTERS OF INSECT EGGS BURN LIKE NEBULAE, SUSPENDED IN THEIR UNIQUE AND VINE-WROUGHT COSMOS...
THROUGH HIM, I SPRAWL WITH THE SHAMAN, SCRAPING, STEAMING, DRAGONFLIES STITCHING NEON THREADS THROUGH THE DAMP AIR SURROUNDING ME...
BEYOND HIM I WRESTLE THE PLANET, GUNK IN LOAM TO MY ELBOWS AS IT ARCHES BENEATH ME, TUMBLING ENDLESSLY THROUGH ENDLESS INK.
THE BARK ENCRUSTS MY FLANKS. THE MOSS CLIMBS MY SPINE TO EMBRACE MY SHOULDERS...
WE... ARE... ONE CREATURE...
...AND ALL... ...THAT THERE IS... ...IS IN US...

clerk personally is not familiar with it —

MARK: *Bruce, can you comment on DC's position?*

BRUCE BRISTOW (Sales Manager of DC Comics): We try very hard, in our order solicitations, to describe the books and — this is probably the only panel I can remember in a long time where I've been glad not to have our books mentioned!

MARK: *Well, we did talk about WATCHMEN.*

BRUCE: Yes, but before we have a page drawn of that book, we've already told people exactly what it's going to be, and I don't think we should have anyone misunderstand. Obviously, consistency is desirable, from issue to issue. It's an aesthetic problem — you can't have the same thing month after month after month without change. Variety will cause a book to yield to change. VIGILANTE recently is a case that doesn't fit into any of your standard taboos. There's no impalement, there's no severing, there's no sex, there's just a ------ adult.

AUDIENCE: And very well done! *(Applause.)*

BRUCE: Thank you. Nonetheless, that's a book that bent many parents.

MARK: *Okay, can we hear from a few more publishers? Rick — did you want to comment?*

RICK OBADIAH: We're not too happy with a rating system. When we've had subject matter that we thought might be a little risque we've gone out of our way to inform everybody. We've even gone as far as putting our calenders in little plastic bags so that Gary wouldn't have to do it! Again — we all have to be responsible for what we do, what we sell, what we publish. I think that it's reasonable to ask all publishers in this room to act responsibly about what they publish. I would be opposed to a rating system.

GARY: I kinda get the feeeling that publishers wouldn't mind a rating system if they knew they would never get blacked out of any markets, that it wouldn't make any difference with sales.

JIM FRIEL: I don't think any of us said that.

GARY: No, no, no — just a minute! Carol did say that she was afraid that it could make a difference in some markets, and Rick insinuated it — that you guys are afraid that it could limit *where* your books are on sale!

RICK: I didn't mean to imply that I didn't want a rating system because it would pull me off of the shelf — I want to be expressly clear — I don't want a rating system! I think, as a publisher, we do our own rating when we decide what to publish. I think one of the problems of this industry is that whenever there's been a problem with a book, whether it's this year, two years ago, it was because one of our fellow publishers, to many of us, was acting irresponsible. I don't want to have a rating system put on *me* because of what I feel is irresponsibility from another publisher. As I said earlier, I would rather see a retailer close me down, if it's my books. If the material is that intolerable — then close me down!

CAROL: And I think Gary's right to make up some clear answers for his store. I'm not worried about a rating system blocking our distribution. I think to invent a rating system, which has at its core a focus on sexual content, is like raising a red flag to people who are uncomfortable with that. *You* will lose sales, distributors in this room will lose sales, retailers will lose sales, publishers in this room will lose sales — but you won't just lose sales, you'll lose your *rights* to do such sophisticated comics — and *that's* what I'm worried about with a rating system. I don't want the right of a reader — I don't want the right of a retailer — I don't want the right of a distributor — and we certainly don't want, as publishers, the right to do a comic book that you're really

"I don't want our rights lost over some

proud of — to be lost because some semi-hysterical person has a sexual hang-up and doesn't want any sexual content in their comic books! *That's* what I'm worried about!

Because I've seen it happen in movies — right now there are mass movements saying, "You can't do X-rated movies!" It's not groups of people saying, "I won't watch X-rated movies," it's that they can't be made. If they're made, they can't be distributed! And if they're distributed, they can't be *sold*! And if they're sold, the customer has no right to buy them!

That's really the sum of the problem that I have with a rating system.

GARY: *(Pause)* It sounds like, then, you're equating it more with censorship than with self-regulation.

JIM FRIEL: One thing leads to another.

GARY: *(Thoughtful)* Yeah. *(Pause)* In Chicago a lot of people know, you know, I'm not an advocate of censorship. We

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FRANK MILLER SAYS...

Frank Miller was one of the featured guests at the 1986 Mid-Ohio-Con, a benefit for the March of Dimes, held in Mansfield, Ohio. His stage appearance concentrated on the issue of Censorship and Ratings in comics. Delayed due to a $47. speeding ticket, our reporter, Kirk Groeneveld, joined Miller's comments in progress.

Other guests, including John Byrne, Bill Sienkiewicz, Dave Sim (CEREBUS), Dick Giordano, John Totleben (MIRACLEMAN), Stephen Bissette (SWAMP THING), Tom Batiuk & Jerry Shamray (FUNKY WINKERBEAN/JOHN DARLING!) were on hand. Some of the guests added their comments and questions during Frank's appearance...

FRANK MILLER: Film is regulated; TV is. One thing that has been held up as sacred in America is literature. They don't rate books. They're smart enough to realize that they've got no right. And the only people who would end up setting up that kind of system are always the wrong people.

And as soon as we start saying "Yeah, you can rate us," what we're doing is saying, "Jerry Falwell is right." We're saying that they have a right and can tell us what to do.

FELLOW PANELIST: *Extreme right! (Much laughter.)*

FRANK: I think we'd discourage work that wasn't GP. For one thing, what it would do — what I think it would do — is this: it would change the way people would think about them, because they'd be shooting for different ratings. And it would wave a big red flag to all the imitation Christians out there who are going to war on Art.

I don't see a single good purpose it could serve.

AUDIENCE: *Don't you think that the commercial aspects of the business would kick in, and if there was a rating system, that when the people with the money found out that the X-rated stuff sold better, CASPER would be X-rated without any change in content?*

FRANK: Much like **Lucas** went through with STAR WARS to get a rating of PG? Yeah, it's possible.

AUDIENCE: *So rating would be pointless, either way.*

FRANK: Yeah, yeah. And a waste of everyone's time and money.

AUDIENCE: *Do you change your style depending on how or where your work will be published?*

FRANK: Oh, that's just it...I find myself writing completely differently depending on who I'm working with, what format it's in, and the character.

ELEKTRA: ASSASSIN was completely written when **Bill Sienkiewicz** got it. After he illustrated it, I completely rewrote

semi-hysterical person's sex hang-ups."

have underground sections — I just wanted you to know that.

AUDIENCE: *(Sporadic laughter.)*

MIKE SMITH: A question for the publishers — would you consider a rating system just at the stage of solicitation and not on the product itself? Rick?

RICK: I'd say "No," I'd stick by my guns and say that I'll give you the information, and if I give you something that is so inconsistent with my track record, or what I've put in my solicitation — send it back!

MARK: *I'd like to thank everybody for being here. Also, I'd like to stress, from my own observation, communication seems to be paramount in answering a lot of these questions. Communication from the publisher to the distributor to the retailer. Communication between the retailers and their clerks. And, perhaps most important, communication between the retailers and their community. Thanks, everyone!*

it to take better advantage of what he'd put in.

With DAREDEVIL, the goal was to do a much more straight-forward crime adventure. And with ELEKTRA, it's being allowed to run away with itself — on its own little strange tangents — I'm really enjoying working on it.

AUDIENCE: *Are you concerned with the industry reaction or lack of response to the push toward censorship?*

FRANK: Right! Noise is starting to happen. People are starting to get frightened. I'm just very worried, because the comics industry did not exactly act...couragously, last time there was a threat. You know, **Bill Gaines** was left standing out there alone while everyone else was folding the tents up. I think people may be folding up the tents before the invasion, this time.

AUDIENCE: *Are you getting any pressure from vocal religious groups in response to your work or other creators' work?*

FRANK: There's a lot of that going on, right now. There's a lot of pressure from a fairly small group of people, who are largely using — of all things! — THE BIBLE to preach pure hatred. It's affected TV terribly...that's why TV is so unwatchable...because people think in censorship terms when writing this stuff.

FELLOW PANELIST: Do you feel that ratings will affect all comic art, including newspaper strips?

FRANK: It might not directly affect you. It will most certainly affect me in what I am to do. Once the notion gets accepted, it never goes away. We've still got that stupid Comics Code and it hasn't done anything in 30 years. I mean, it was invented as a cover: something to wave at the Senate sub-committee to say "Don't censor us, we're already taken care of."

AUDIENCE: *Do you see a need for ratings to protect the young reader — or for self-controls?*

FRANK: I don't know. I don't like the idea of the industry becoming a place that thinks in those terms. I've seen what it's done to every other field. And comics, right now, are in a very, very vulnerable shape. They're on the verge of breaking into a new acceptance...ah, public perception is changing about them... people are about to accept it and write news stories with a whole new idea of comic books: that adults can do it.

But that's a very vulnerable thing right now, it's a very tentative thing, and it could go away over night. And I want to claim a bunch, a lot, of new territory here.

AUDIENCE: *What form do you want to take comics and the industry into?*

FRANK: I really don't know. I mean, I've got ideas about the kind of comics that I want to do — I really love the fact that

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"We've still got that stupid comics code."

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a bunch of us are here doing this, right now. If you walk around and look at the guest list of this convention, you'll see represented here more different kinds of comics than probably existed five years ago. I think the field is changing fundamentally. I think it may be a change for the better.

AUDIENCE: *What ideas do you have in the works right now?*

FRANK: *(Humorously.)* I'm not...I'm retiring. *(grins.)* I got some new stuff that I'm working up, but I can't really talk about it right now.

AUDIENCE: *Do you have any particalar characters or heroes that you'd really like to write?*

FRANK: I've gotten a lot of them out of my system. I mean, Batman was just a real kick...ever since I've been 6 years old, that was, like, the big hero to me. And when I started using Superman in DARK KNIGHT! **John Byrne** and I were talking yesterday, and we were both apparently having opposite moments...when he used Batman and I used Superman, both of us were thinking, like, maybe I had picked the wrong character.

I mean, Superman is such a great character. But none of them are really leaping out. Captain America I finally got to do in a MARVEL FANFARE story. There's a lot of really good characters out there and a lot of characters that I think — with just a little twist — you'd have something special. Just ask **John Byrne:** I mean, he's taken over the big lame-duck book and moved it right to center stage. This stuff definitely can be brought back to life.

AUDIENCE: *What's your view on governments and big bureaucracies? You don't seem to trust them in your latest stories.*

FRANK: Yeah! What's your view on axe murderers? Like, you don't seem to trust them! *(Laughter.)*

FELLOW PANELIST: Frank, you voted Republican in the last eight elections — you know you did. *(More laughter.)*

AUDIENCE: *Why did you keep ELEKTRA as a villain, a ninja, after her rebirth in DAREDEVIL?*

FRANK: That's what the story seemed to call for. It's like, when you do Elektra, she's just Elektra — she's not like the bad girl with the heart of gold, who's gonna turn out nice in the end. Elektra is one of a number of characters that have been created to really describe genuine paranoia.

AUDIENCE: *In DARK KNIGHT #3, would Batman have killed the Joker if he'd been physically able to?*

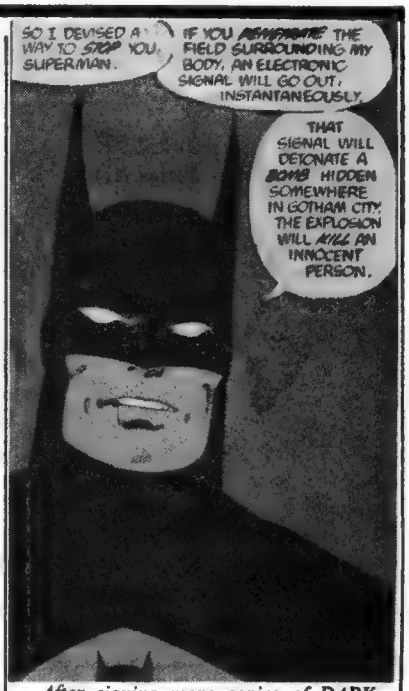
FRANK: This is the question that I keep getting: Was Batman just unable to kill the Joker, or was it an emotional thing with him? *(Confirming:)* Yeah, it was an emotional thing.

It's like my last conversation with **John Byrne** is working it's way into every question here: what I discovered is that when you're working on a character like that — like Superman — that legend is really what's in control. It won't allow itself to get tossed out. The essential things that make Superman Superman had to be in John's version and in ours.

And all that stuff I found, just worked its way back in. I always thought, "Robin??! Batmobile??! They're gone!" And they just came in, in slightly different forms. And I really was enjoying the fact that the character was as old as the legend is in the story. The fun of it was making it all work without going against the grain of the continuity.

AUDIENCE: *Why is it that you didn't have Batman dying?*

FRANK: It's like I was saying: you can't kill him! Okay — I'LL KILL HIM — but nobody's gonna believe it: he's Batman. I mean, you're not going to convince me that Supergirl is dead. If he would have died, that would have made him human, and he's not. He's like something superhuman — something that'll go on forever, in one form or another. And the closest thing to death is when he takes the costume off.


SO I DEVISED A WAY TO STOP YOU, SUPERMAN.
IF YOU REMOVE THE FIELD SURROUNDING MY BODY, AN ELECTRONIC SIGNAL WILL GO OUT, INSTANTANEOUSLY.
THAT SIGNAL WILL DETONATE A BOMB HIDDEN SOMEWHERE IN GOTHAM CITY. THE EXPLOSION WILL KILL AN INNOCENT PERSON.

After signing more copies of DARK KNIGHT and autographing a numbered, limited-edition copy for the March-Of-Dimes raffle, Frank edged his way toward the door. Our reporter asked him a few further questions about a rumor on the supposed rape-death of Jason Todd by the Joker. He stopped, looked puzzled, and clarified that, "Jason Todd was killed by the Joker, but as for the rape bit, I've never written that." Miller denied the scenario and disclaimed any such concept.

Frank had to catch a plane an hour earlier than planned. As a result, many fans are eagerly awaiting his return at the 1987 Mid-Ohio-Con in Mansfield, Ohio. Only time will tell if he will be able to return for the November 7-8 fundraiser this year.

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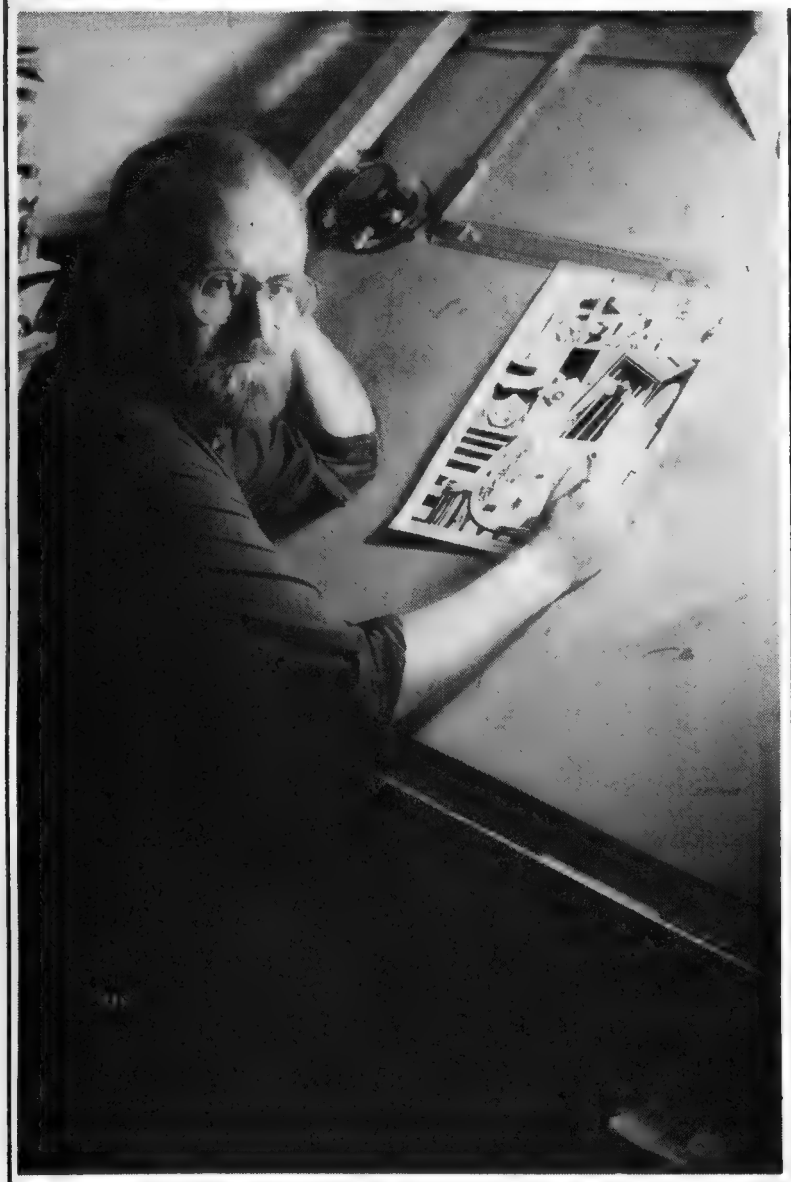
"I don't have a problem with a rating system."



JOHN BYRNE

When we first approached David Kraft with the possibility of a new interview with John (gosh I'm busy) Byrne, DAK came back at us with a challenge of sorts. He wanted us to ask John questions that he had never been asked. Quite a difficult task, when you consider that at this point in his career, John had recently accepted the assignment of renovating Krypton's native son, and in the span of a few short months had just been interviewed by very literally everybody else (including us — twice)!

We had hit a stone wall.

Then DC gave us a helping hand by announcing a new ratings system, coming on the heels of a spirited debate raging amongst pros, retailers, and fans alike. Since John had only briefly stated his views on the subject, we decided to pursue his opinions in this delicate area.

John's studio exists as a spacious room in his large colonial home. The room itself must be seen to be believed. Covering the walls are dozens of pages of artwork featuring some of John's favorite artists. (The only examples of John's work that adorn the walls are his six MAN OF STEEL covers, and several FF covers that were made 3-D especially for him by Todd Reis — see COMICS INTERVIEW #41.) On the fireplace mantle stand all of the DC superhero action figures, while another wall is hidden behind a massive bookcase overflowing with books, including dozens of hardbound volumes of Marvel comicbooks (again especially done for John).

Standing in one corner (near the bay window) is John's drawing table, and in the other is a wire newsstand twirling comic rack — something every fan's home should have. On the other side of the room sits John's MacIntosh computer, which is used to not only add special effects to his artwork, but for doodling, and on which he wrote his first all-prose horror novel for Warner Books.

BOB SODARO: *Let's start with censorship — you know, the really tough issues, and work our way down to the easy stuff. For the benefit of those who didn't read your guest editorial in THE COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE, could you please reiterate your stand on this issue?*

JOHN BYRNE: Well, basically, I don't have a problem with a rating system *per se*. I don't think it will work, but I see nothing wrong with telling people what they're buying. Someone in that same letters column made a very valid point, and said that he wouldn't buy from a supermarket package simply labeled "food."

"Frank Miller is now protesting the

He would want to know a little more than that. The same is true, I think, in comics. People are entitled to know what's in them. They are entitled to know if their eight-year-old should be allowed to buy it.

BOB: *Yet your name appeared on the letter protesting DC's new rating policies.*

BYRNE: That was protesting the fact that it at least appeared that the ratings were prepared secretly. As a result of that, none of the freelance creative staff had any input — or was invited to give any input. It was that we were protesting, not the ratings *per se*, because we had not seen the ratings. How could we protest something we had not seen? I know that **Frank Miller** is now protesting the actual ratings. And that's where he and I part philosophically.

BOB: *When the motion picture industry decided to rate the movies, I don't think that the people who set those ratings asked the writers, directors and actors for their input on the system. Even if they had, the people who are writing and directing today weren't writing or directing then. I don't think I understand the difference.*

BYRNE: I don't know if the producers, writers or anyone else was consulted as far as the movies were concerned. We weren't, and we felt that it would perhaps have been nice if we were. Certainly, as it turns out, it's not going to affect my work at all, since my Superman fits comfortably into the universal market where they want it to be, anyway.

JOHN WILCOX: *Well, do you think that there is any chance now that people are going to go the other way, and say "Well, let me put some stronger stuff in here to push it into a different category"?*

BYRNE: Like I said in my editorial, I don't think that a rating system will work, because this is a commercial industry. So if one of the rating groups is selling better, then we will see other books gravitate into that rating without necessarily any editorial change. The example I used was, if the "R" stuff is selling better, then we will see an "R" rated CASPER, with no editorial change in content; if the "G" stuff is selling better, then we'll see a "G" rated AMERICAN FLAGG! with no change in content.

BOB: *You can't sell a "G" rated movie anymore, so they spice it up and make it a "PG" movie.*

BYRNE: They'll give it a "PG" rating without spicing it up!

JOHN: *Is the rating system strictly Marvel and DC?*

BYRNE: I don't know. Marvel is professing these days *not* to be rating. The response from Marvel has been, "What

Exclusive! Byrne computer art.

do you mean — we're not rating our books." My response to that is that they've been rating their stuff for about four years through separate companies. You have Universal/Star, Adult/Marvel, and Mature/Epic. It's a little more subtle than putting it on the cover. Nobody's going to go to the Star line and expect to find what's in the regular Marvel, or go to the Epic books and find what's in the Star line.

BOB: *Do you find that to be a form of censorship?*

BYRNE: No, I view ratings as a hedge against censorship. My argument is to go see an "X" rated movie sometime, and then come back and tell me that's been censored. If you put a rating on it then you're declaring against censorship and it hasn't been censored. You're telling people what it is. If someone comes around and says, "you can't do that" in a particular book or movie, that's censorship. If somebody says, "This movie requires this rating," that's not censorship. It's saying, "You can still do it, you just have to label it." It's saying that you have to tell us what's in toothpaste.

BOB: *In a letter of mine that was recently printed in CBG I related that in an episode of WKRP a Christian group came to the station, first to ban records being played that they found offensive, then they banned offensive records that the station had yet to play, and finally they banned John Lennon's "Imagine" because of its religious and philosophic content. It kept escalating, and when the station refused to go along, the group began a boycott against the station's sponsors. My view on this is that we cave in too much and we'll have nothing left. It seems as if we wind up with these Christians...*

BYRNE: It's not just Christians.

BOB: *Well, it seems to be mostly this Christian "Moral Majority." Now don't get me wrong, I'm a Christian, too — and I practice my faith — but I find that Christianity has become the "no" religion. No you can't dance, no you can't see this movie or read that book, no you can't do this or that. It's almost as if those behind it are afraid that people will discover that the knowledge of whatever-this-is is going to turn people against them. They're going to discover that sex is fun or something.*

BYRNE: The old definition of a Puritan is someone who is terrified that someone, somewhere, is having fun.

JOHN: *But on the bottom line, is this really censorship?*

BYRNE: Not a rating system. I don't see it as censorship. I would say it was censorship if DC, for example, was now to come and say that all the books had to be universal, had to be "G" rated. That would be censorship. That would be forcing everyone into the same mold. But not if you go in and say that these certain titles we would like to keep universal, and everything else you can play with. I wouldn't want to take SUPERMAN beyond that, I wouldn't want to see him a "mature" book. I don't think he belongs in that strata. Batman is another story: He's a whole different character. His origin and structure is a little more mature.

JOHN: *But say BATMAN is a "universal" book, can someone write a "non-universal" story? If a book is universal, does it always have to be universal?*

BYRNE: I think it should be. My feeling is that if you want to do a Batman sequence like Frank and **David Mazzucchelli** recently did, the "Year One" storyline — which is infinitely more mature than the kind of Batman stories I read when I was 12 years old — that probably, under the new rating system, should be set as a special package off to one side. So you have the built-in assurance that if your book has been universally rated, it's not going to go suddenly "R" this month. If it's "PG" it's not going to go "X."

JOHN: *You say that you want to keep SUPERMAN a Universal book. What*

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ratings. That's where he and I part."

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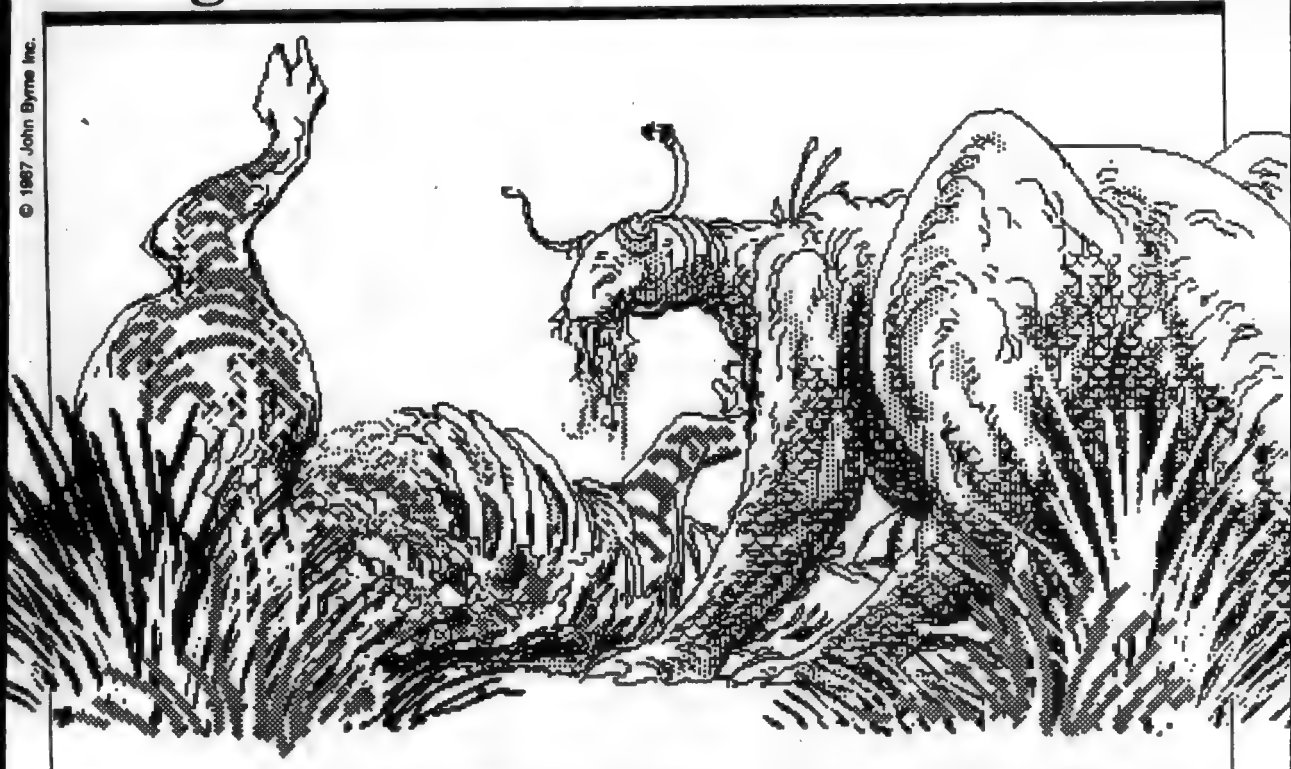

would happen if you developed a storyline where you felt that an essential part of it would not fit into that rating's description?

BYRNE: Nothing is that essential. There is no plot element in the world that cannot be gotten around somehow. I was watching the other night that **Robert Young** TV movie, MURDER OR MERCY. There was a scene in that where **Michael Learned** comes back from the court or something and breaks down and sobs her guts out in her husband's arms. She's taking a shower when this happens. It was titilation as far as I was concerned. Why is this woman taking a shower when she breaks down and collapses in her husband's arms? Why isn't she in the kitchen? Why isn't she in the bedroom? Why isn't she in the driveway? Why aren't they coming home in the car? It was a very specific call that whoever wrote that thing had to make.

BOB: *That was like in THE BIG CHILL.*

BYRNE: I didn't see THE BIG CHILL.

BOB: *There was one nude shot in the movie, where a woman was crying in the shower because her friend had died, and I remember saying, "Why is this scene here?"*

BYRNE: I remember when I saw CHINATOWN, starring **Jack Nicholson** and **Faye Dunaway**, the expository sequence where we find out what the fuck this movie is about happens when **Dunaway** and **Nicholson** are in bed together, and her right breast is exposed. And I remember sitting in the theater thinking, "Well, how the hell are they going to show this on TV? This movie doesn't make any sense until this scene happens, and they're going to have to take this scene out." So it's really a question of structure. There's no story element that is so vital that you can't get around it somehow, get some other way to do it, without having to change the rating level.

BOB: *What about the Roger McKenzie/Frank Miller "Angel Dust" story that ran in DAREDEVIL? They were trying to make a very strong anti-drug statement, but the entire story was banned.*

BYRNE: Well, that was a very personal call. The question becomes: Is it really that necessary to the character to do that story? As it happened, that story got printed, and it could have been done any number of ways to get the story out. Things like that don't necessarily have to occur. DAREDEVIL under the structure of Marvel at that time was ranging all up and down the imaginary rating scale. So you can look at it and say, "What if I want to do a mature Superman story?" Well, I could do a graphic novel, or a DARK KNIGHT format, or any number of things that will take the character elsewhere. Up front I will look at it very hard and say, "Is this a Superman story? Does it have to be Superman? Can it be anyone else? If I have to get this message across do I have to use this particular character? Can I use Wonder Woman?"

BOB: *Once the rating system is in place and they discover that "R" rated books are selling better, what would you do if they came to you and said, "We want you to spice up SUPERMAN"?*

BYRNE: Oh, I could do it, if they really wanted me to do it. I don't think that's ever going to happen. That would be the easiest thing in the world. It's no trick to put the stuff in, the trick is keeping the stuff out. It takes much more thought and imagination to tell a "realistic" story — as one example — without having anybody ever say "shit." You know, at times I bang my head against the board because I've reached a point where I really need someone to say "shit." *(Laughter.)* One of the greatest things about going over to DC is that they allow "hell" and "damn" and Marvel doesn't. I've reached points where I can actually have someone say "damn," which to me is a perfectly innocuous word. It's lost all it's meaning. Now "Goddamn" is another word altogether — but a simple D-A-M-N is okay. I had Superman say "Damn," which made me feel like "Whoa!" lightning bolts are going to come out of the sky and strike me. But, yeah, people talk this way. I don't think that I would ever have Superman say "shit," because I don't think that Superman talks that way. Lois

"If I had done the same story with Pete

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probably would, but that's a different thing altogether.

JOHN: *Do you think that there was any one specific incident that made DC want to institute a ratings system?*

BYRNE: I don't know if there was a specific incident, but there certainly has been a growing awareness that there are people out there — **Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell,** and the like, who are grabbing things like DARK KNIGHT and AMERICAN FLAGG! and ELEKTRA and saying, "Look what they're putting in comics these days." And we need something to say to the wider audience, "Yeah, we're putting that in comics, but we're putting that in very specific comics. It's no more than like taking DEBBIE DOES DALLAS and saying, "Look what they're doing in movies these days." Well, yeah, they're doing that in movies, but they're also doing FLIGHT OF THE NAVIGATOR.

JOHN: *But don't you think that, in a case like that, even if it says "For Mature Readers," a Pat Robertson isn't going to give comics the credibility they deserve and say, "Yes, this is for an adult market," rather than saying, "No, these are comic books."*

BYRNE: The point is, we have something to come back with. If somebody jumps up and says, "Look at this garbage that they're doing!" then we, by putting the ratings on them, I feel, are in the position to say, "Wait a minute, fella, you're taking a very small . . ." Again, it's like taking a "XXX" rated movie and trying to represent it as typical movie fare. If you tried to do that, everyone would say, "You're nuts." So now, when we do the same thing in comics, we can say, "You're grabbing the hard end of the spectrum. Back down here we have other stuff. Remember the SUPERMAN you read when you were a kid? It's still like it was when you read it then."

BOB: *Still, the problem is that most of the people doing this stuff remember comics when they were "All in Color for a Dime." They were "funnybooks," and they still think of them as being "funnybooks." Now, to see even a "hell" or a "damn" in a comic book makes them crazy. "Hey, my kid reads this stuff." How are they going to react to that?*

BYRNE: Kids are going to hear that on television and they're certainly going to hear that in the streets. My bottom line is that if you can see it between, say, seven and nine o'clock on network TV, then it's reasonably safe to put it in a comic book. If they can say "damn" on NEWHART, then they can say "damn" in comics. If they go to bed with each other on DYNASTY that's after 10:00, and you might not necessarily see that in comics. People are going to see what they want to see, anyway. I wrote a letter to The COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE chastising **Robert Ingersoll** — CBG's "The Law is a Ass" columnist — because he referred to what happened to Lana Lang in the second issue of SUPERMAN as a rape. Wait a minute! This lady had the shit kicked out of her, but show me where anything indicates that there was any sexual content. Rape is a very specific thing that happens. If you take a lady out in a back alley and beat her over the head with a baseball bat, you're not raping her. As I said in my letter, if I had done exactly the same story with Pete Ross — because I could have done it with Pete — would he have called it rape?

JOHN: *I guess the bottom line on the rating system is how the retailers handle it. Are they not going to let an eight-year-old pick up a mature book?*

BYRNE: Hopefully, they won't. If you're going to have idiots that are going to sell it to the kids anyway, then the whole system falls apart. In theory, if little Johnny goes into the corner drugstore and tries to buy PLAYBOY, someone is going to say, "Wait a minute, kid, this says 'entertainment for adults'."

Ross — would he have called it rape?"

BOB: *On the other side of the coin, my family owns a liquor store and kids try to buy liquor all the time. Now my Aunt won't sell it to them if they don't have an ID, but I know where they can go to buy stuff where the owner won't check for IDs. And I know underage kids with fake IDs who buy booze, and get into nightclubs.*

BYRNE: Sure, you can always get the stuff. One can envision dark alleys where kids can go and buy mature comic books. "Psst, kid, you wanna buy some WATCHMEN?"

JOHN: *"Hey, kid, you want some LOVE AND ROCKETS?" (Laughter.)*

BYRNE: Certainly, they are going to be able to get it somewhere, but at least we are doing as much as we can do by introducing a rating system. The only other thing we can do is blanderize everything, and if we blanderize everything: Number one, we wouldn't be able to get it to a point where it wouldn't offend someone, somewhere, anyway; and Number two, *that* would be censorship. Then you would see me signing all the petitions in the world protesting.

BOB: *Do you find that you're making SUPERMAN a "PG" or "Universal" comic because you think that he should be written that way, or do you think comics should be "Universal," so that's why you're writing SUPERMAN? Would you do BATMAN, for instance?*

BYRNE: I would do BATMAN, but I think my BATMAN would be very different from what they're currently doing.

BOB: *Would it be very different from what you're doing in SUPERMAN?*

BYRNE: It would be different, but...it's hard to express. When I did Batman in MAN OF STEEL I did the existing Batman. If somebody said, "Here, John, do Batman, he's your character," I would tend to go back more to the Batman that I knew when I was a kid, who — while he's every bit as psychotic as the Batman we currently see — was having fun at it. The old **Dick Sprang** stories, where he's swinging through a window on his batrope, kicking somebody's teeth down their throat with a big grin on his face. I think that this whole dark, grim, obsessive, creature-of-the-night thing may have gone too far. Because, if anybody should be well adjusted, it's Batman.

BOB: *Why?*

BYRNE: Because he's doing what he wants to do. This is a guy who said, "I'm going to spend the rest of my life warring on criminals," and he does it. He goes out and breaks arms, and kicks people's heads in. He should be having a ball. He should not be grim and repressed and all bent out of shape. That's counter psychology. This is a guy who should be just loving every minute of it. "Oh boy, I get to put the suit on and get to go out and break some more heads."

BOB: *That Batman would frighten me.*

BYRNE: Yeah. That's what makes the guy frightening — it's because he's enjoying it. There's a scene in the movie, THE PRESIDENT'S ANALYST, where the CIA agent — played by **Godfrey Cambridge** — assigned to check out whether the **James Coburn** character (the analyst) is okay to be the President's analyst, finally reveals to **Coburn** that he is a CIA agent and he does it in the process of telling him that he just killed a Lebanese — or whatever — agent down on 42nd street. Just stabbed this guy. And how when he did this, the guy represented all the things that he hated in life. Everybody who called him "nigger," and all these kinds of things. And the psychiatrist character is amazed by this revelation, because it explains why this guy is so well-adjusted. Because he is able to vent all the stuff that goes on inside of him — when all this stuff goes on inside of him, he goes out and kills somebody, and gets rid of it. And that's essentially what Batman does. He's got this drive to war on crime, and he's doing it, nobody is stopping him; in fact, he's encouraged to do it. So this guy should be amazingly well-adjusted.

JOHN: *At any point does guilt kick in?*

BYRNE: Apparently not. What we have in the case of Batman is much like we have in the DIRTY HARRY movies, where this is a guy who blows people away and the only thing that makes it "right" is that he never blows away the wrong person. If he ever did, it would destroy the character. The same is true of Batman. If Batman ever accidently beat up the wrong guy, it would destroy him — I mean not just as a character, but Batman himself would be utterly destroyed by the fact that he beat up the wrong guy.

JOHN: *I wish that someone would have that happen to see how he would deal with it.*

BYRNE: That would be the end of the character. He couldn't be Batman anymore. If he crossed the line, he would become a criminal.

JOHN: *How do you know that you're always right? How do you really know?*

BYRNE: Because it's "comic books," and we have the control. That's the magic. It's the same with the DIRTY HARRY movies: How do we know he's always right? Because somebody wrote this thing, and they're not going to write it wrong!

BOB: *Because he's Dirty Harry.*

BYRNE: Yeah. Because the writer decided that he wouldn't kill the wrong person.

JOHN: *You mentioned that Batman is well adjusted because he's doing what he wants to. Well, when we spoke to you last year, you said that you always wanted to do Superman. This was as high as you could go. Now that you're there, how does it feel? You're doing what you wanted to do, outside of being phenomenally well-adjusted...*

BYRNE: I don't know that I'm phenomenally well-adjusted. *(Laughter.)*

JOHN: *Well, it's what you always wanted to do — are you looking beyond it at all? Is there anything else you want to do?*

BYRNE: Sure, there's other stuff, sure. I'm developing a book for DC, I have my eye on half a dozen other titles at DC for when SUPERMAN is no longer interesting. I'm going to work my way through the whole line if I stay in this business long enough. I worked my way through most of the characters at Marvel. I think that DR. STRANGE is about the only thing that I didn't do on a regular basis. There are other things, but for the moment I'm quite content to remain on SUPERMAN. It's what I always wanted to do since I was eight years old.

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"We print about twenty different under-

ground comics . . . Crumb, ZIPPY . . . "

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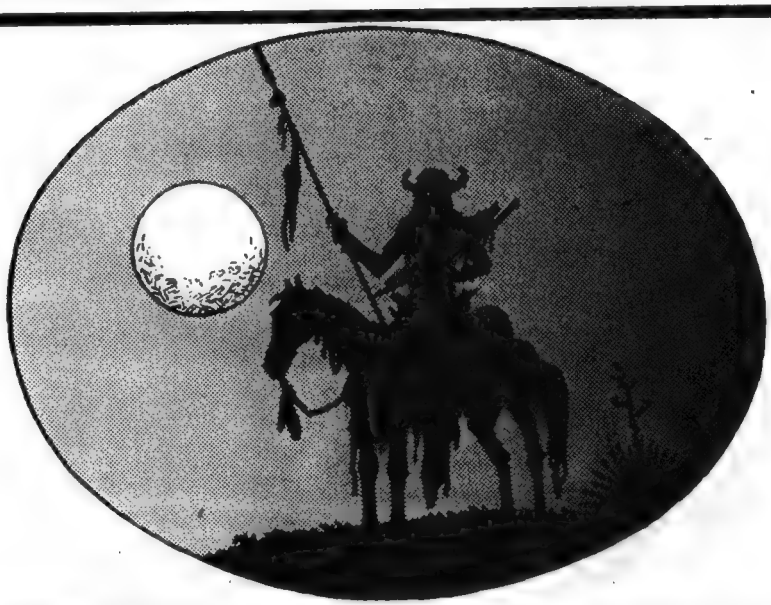

From COMMANCHE MOON, by Jaxon, published jointly by Rip Off Press and Last Gasp.

RON TURNER

It was a steamy San Francisco morning when I drove my fifteen-year-old nephew Julian to the large mission building that houses the offices of the Last Gasp publisher. This was an exciting prospect, since I'd spent much of my late teens reading underground comics, and dramatizing the work (especially of R. Crumb) with my friends in questionable states. Amidst stacks and shelves and cluttered desks, Julian and I bearded Last Gasp's leonine publisher in his den.

MARK BORAX: *I was surprised to find a whole variety of products here that I didn't expect. Are you acting as distributor for all of these other publishers?*
RON TURNER: Yeah, we distribute for about 160 different publishers.
MARK: *Who are some of them?*
RON: Well, they range from presses like Steel Dragon and Vortex — you know, small places — to Fantaco and Fantagraphics — to some degree we carry their lines — and then some of the bigger presses like St. Martin's Press and New American Library and . . . all the majors, basically — Bantam and Ballantine and Random House.
MARK: *So most of your trade is as a distributor rather than as a publisher, or is it half and half?*
RON: Well, really, we're two companies in one — at least two companies in one. Whatever we publish goes right into the distribution arm so it's hard to say, because we sell our books, the things that we publish, on to, like, 60 different distributors. We buy certain books at a level where we can afford to sell them on to distributors. Most of the things that you see around the warehouse are books that we sell just to retail stores or mail order. So we have, like, a three-tiered system of sales and it's never really clear whether the publishing is paying for the distribution or the distribution is paying for the publishing. *(Laughter.)* I haven't been able to sort that one out yet.
MARK: *What are the three tiers?*
RON: Well, there's mail-order sales — which is akin to having a retail store, except that the costs you incur with mail order are more on the level of a wholesale jobber, simply because you have to stock all of these things and you never know what people are doing, and you've got mailing costs to go out to them, and advertising costs, which you don't have on the same level if you have a retail store. So, on one level then, we are a catalogue house. We send out thousands and thosands of catalogues. On another level, we sell to retail stores and in that respect we act like a distributor, and we go to all kinds of specialty shops. Like, although our main thrust is books and comics here, we mainly sell to everything *but* bookstores. We try to find the books that fit into little niches, like we have guide-to-dying types of books which we sell to hospices. We have books that are, like, real new wave books that go into new-wave record shops.
MARK: *Mostly in the California area?*
RON: No, I'd say about 10% of our sales are in the Bay area and about 20% are in California. Yesterday afternoon we had a shop that came in here from Australia and they bought about $3,000 worth of merchandise. They buy heavily into ZIPPY types of T-shirts and mugs and buttons and all kinds of books and comics. They bought a wide variety of comic books. And, at the same time, a record and book store from Italy wandered in and they also bought a few thousand dollars worth of merchandise. It's uncommon they both happened at the same time — and, of course, after most of the staff had gone home *(laughter)* — but still it's not uncommon for us to sell to around the world places. We just had a big order from a firm down in Argentina. We sell a lot to England, and we have, you know, Canadian distributors as well. It makes it

"I felt like Johnny Comicbookseed or

more fun. I prefer, actually, international trade to local stuff. It seems a little more exotic.

MARK: *Keeps your day a little more exciting.*

RON: Yeah. Well, as you've been here, we've been having calls back and forth to England today for different books and ongoing things, and what happens is where people in the old days used to share print runs — around here, locally, when we were doing the underground comics — now we're co-publishing books with different firms around the world, just to make sure that things get done and can be done at a *number* level, number of printed piece level, that is commensurate with the cost so that you can sell it at a price where people would actually buy it.

MARK: *Which books are you co-publishing?*

RON: Well, we have a book on **David Bowie** that we're co-publishing in England.

MARK: *Would I be correct in assuming that you've been publishing since the first real high point of underground comics, like around '68 maybe — is that considered a high point?*

RON: Well, if you bought an underground comic in 1968 you probably owned one of four existing books that were out.

MARK: *ZAP? FREAK BROTHERS?*

RON: I don't think THE FREAK BROTHERS were out. There was a FEDS 'N' HEADS that came out in Texas. Rip-Off Press didn't start until '69. Printmint was a poster shop in Haight-Ashbury and got a tremendous distribution because of the Summer of Love in its posters, and as a result into that distribution channel went comic books. That kind of set up the first major big distribution.

MARK: *In '67?*

RON: No. There weren't any underground comics to distribute yet. The first ZAP was printed in the middle of '67 and it was, like, 1000 copies. That's hardly a high point. Most of them sold on the streets of Haight-Ashbury. I don't think many people saw underground comics much until about '69. We didn't start publishing until the beginning of 1970. So, at that time, like in '69, things were really jumping as far as the sales went, and then '70 also.

MARK: *It was all touch and go?*

RON: Well, how do you know who to sell to? You can say, "Hey, there's a guy in Barcelona that will take 5,000 copies of your book." That's great. What's the guy's name and what's his address and what's his phone number? You don't know. I mean, these things, you have to figure it out. In other words, there was no existing situation and people hung onto their customers like crazy, because they didn't want to let anybody else know what they had and there was a lot of competition. I published four books that year, in 1970, and after the first couple of books I published I got the other distributors, I got Rip-Off and Printmint, to carry our comics.

MARK: *Which four books were they?*

RON: The first one was SLOW DEATH FUNNIES #1, and the second was IT AIN'T ME, BABE. The first one was a comic and Trina edited that.

MARK: *Trina Robbins?*

RON: Yeah. The third was SKULL #2. **Jackson** was an accountant at Rip-Off and an excellent underground cartoonist. For some reason they had a falling out within their own company about SKULL COMICS — Rip-Off had published SKULL #1 about a year earlier — and so **Jackson** brought that over for us and we printed and sold that, and that was more towards the fall. Then in December of that year we had SLOW DEATH #2, which was a combination effort between **Jackson** and **Sheridan** and also contained...well, **Corben** was in SKULL and also in SLOW DEATH #2. So it kind of set with irons the people that were sort of in that group.

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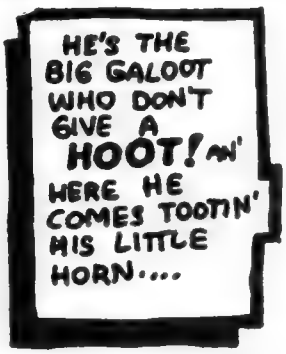
This page and next: Deranged creations from the incomparable Robert Crumb.

something . . . passing out comic books."



And all those copies somehow miraculously sold. They sold out.

MARK: *How many?*

RON: Oh, I think the first printing of SLOW DEATH was 20,000 and who would have guessed it would have sold out — although I gave away about 4,000. I went across the country a couple of times, had a lot of radical friends from the anti-war movement, and there was, like, a lot of cultural changes and shifts going on at the time anyway.

MARK: *This is 1970?*

RON: Yeah. I felt like **Johnny Comicbookseed** or something . . . *(Laughter.)* . . . passing out comic books all over. And I got quite a mixed reaction from people at the time. A lot of people *loved* them — and I liked those people — and a lot of people *hated* them. They thought it was a silly waste. See, a lot of the radicals wanted everything . . . like as much print as possible to fit on a printed page.

MARK: *So the radicals thought they weren't serious enough?*

RON: No. No. Some radicals did, not all radicals. Some radicals loved them and some didn't. Some people from that era thought that you shouldn't waste any space on a piece of paper. It should be typed all the way through. Then there were those of us that believed that an underground comic panel was worth a thousand words, you know . . . so it went on from there.

MARK: *Were you distributing in head shops mostly?*

RON: Yeah. Well, I went around first and just found a few places to sell our comics. And I went into, like, Printmint and Rip-Off and they took our comics to sell; and when it was time for them to pay their bills — they didn't have any money at first — they paid me off in *their* comic books, and that's actually what forced me to get into distribution. I didn't feel bad about selling their books. I didn't mind whether I had 20 copies of something to go up on the stand instead of four copies of something. And so I set up a funny little route. I had dress boutiques and I had a hair salon, a lot of magazine stores, some bookstores, a lot of head shops, someplace that made leather coats, the Dead Cow. Do you believe that name — the Dead Cow? *(Laughter.)* They had a shop on Union Street and over on Chatham Square and they did, like, an incredible business. Leather was really hot back then. Maybe I should go out and buy up all the leather coats I can, you know, for the resurgence of the hippy image. We sold a lot of different places, mainly because I was too *stupid* to know that you weren't supposed to do that.

MARK: *What should you have been doing?*

RON: I should have been going right into the book distribution things and packaging things which, in fact, we did. We hit then with Book People, which is like the nation's largest independent distributor of books now. They started off in about '69 and we started in 1970 and they carried our undergrounds and they still do.

MARK: *In '71 when I hitchhiked to Berkeley I bought, I think, SLOW DEATH at Moe's Bookstore.*

RON: Yeah. Yeah. Moe doesn't carry them anymore. He had a rack in there one day and I . . . I made this nice wooden rack for him, this beautiful little rack, and it got in his way on the way to the refrigerator or something one time and so he destroyed the rack. I think he actually loaned the money to the Printmint to allow them to go into business.

MARK: *Back in the late '60s?*

RON: Yeah. That's kind of funny how things go around — I was just talking with **Alan Ginsberg** once about the origins of the comics and *he* had arranged a grant

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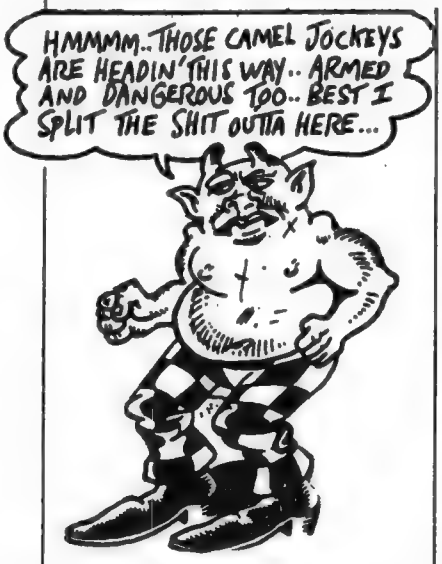
"We had this thing called Viet Nam."



S. Clay Wilson's Checkered Demon, who helped popularize Tree Frog Beer.

that went through that allowed **Charles Plymel** to buy a printing press, and **Charles Plymel** was in fact in this very building — if you would go through this wall behind me you would find a space where the original press that printed ZAP COMICS stood. And **Don Donahue** was working with **Plymel** and knew **Crumb** and put together the first ZAP and so on. I think the first thousand of the original ZAP #1, you'll find "Printed by **Charles Plymel**" on the back, and on the second thousand it says "Printed by **Don Donahue**" —

MARK: *And what did Ginsberg have to do with this?*

RON: He arranged the grant for the press, to pay for the press.

MARK: *So we have Ginsberg to thank for ZAP #1.*

RON: Well, certainly there's a portion there, you know; but it's a funny interconnection, you know, and what creative people do with technology is always interesting and it's kinda nice to be able to track it as well. Often you find certain people have their fingers in a lot of different pies.

MARK: *It seems like around 1970, '71, '72, there were whole lots of undergrounds and then somewhere around the mid-'70s they seemed to die off for about ten years.*

RON: Yeah. Well, we had this thing called the Vietnam War and — how does that connect to underground comics? Well, we shipped over an incredible amount of tonnage or raw materials in the form of bombs. Explosives. I mean an incredible amount. You cannot really imagine . . . you do not have the brains to imagine the amount of stuff that we sent over there. Half a million men. You had to consider the amount of metal that we dropped and the carcinogens that we sprayed, poisons that we threw at them and machines that we left to rust away over there. It's incredible. Well, all of that *cost* something. Somebody had to actually go out and buy that. You just don't buy a ton of metal and air freight it halfway around the world and then drop it onto the ground and leave it without incurring a great cost for fuel or whatever. The economy of America at that time was geared towards war production. In other words, create a demand, create a war, push a lot of things into the war, and pay for it later.

Well, the war was beginning to wind down about '72, '73, and at the same time

people were starting to say, "Okay, what have you paid for all of this with?" — and the answer was air; because that's what war does, you pay for things with air and then you have to make up for it later. As the money source dries up, because there's nothing more to support it, you know, they'd say "Don't print anymore money, we can't back it with anything solid here." What it comes down to is that you have inflation as people attempt to get more money out of this because the money's not worth very much. It's worth less than it was yesterday, and so you bring your price up so that you can keep trying to figure a real value.

So the result was — and this is an elaborate explanation — but the result was that we suddenly had inflation and things began to dry up and jobs which were created artificially to supply this war effort, a tremendous amount of jobs, were going out. It was very easy to live from '67 to '72, '73. It was just, you could survive on, you know, $50. a month. You could stay at some place and you could eat well and you could buy things cheap and prices suddenly started to go up and people started being laid off of all the defense stuff — you had people out of work and a demand on all of these other things. What happened is that people who tended to buy our comics were part of the life-style group that didn't have a lot of money on them. The kinds of people who bought our comics, I think, were more the hip, easygoing folks — although there were a lot of professionals and other folks — they weren't too much into the major part of the economy. As soon as the economy began to collapse the first person who felt this was somebody who was . . . let's say a guy goes down to the store and suddenly milk is now 70¢ a quart instead of 50¢ a quart, and eggs have gone up, and his newspaper went from a dime to 15¢, and gasoline went from 30¢ to 45¢ a gallon, and all of a sudden that extra couple three dollars he had in his pocket which he would spend 50¢ here for a comic, 50¢ there for a comic, wasn't there. He used up his disposable income on survival.

MARK: *When the war ended?*

RON: Well, the war wasn't over yet. It was winding down and it got worse as it got down because then everybody says "pay me" and we suddenly had to pay with the dollar not worth as much. At the same time, comics were selling like crazy, '70, '71, '72, and in 1970 you could have bought everything that I published for $2.00. In 1971 it would have cost you maybe $4.00 or $5.00. In 1972 it would have cost you maybe $12.00. Okay? And

© 1976 S. Clay Wilson

"One-third of our comics are sexual."

© 1979 Lee Marrs

we weren't the only ones producing things, so if you went to buy one of everything — which is where that statistic came from that Capital City Distribution uses now, like how much it would have cost you to buy one of everything this month — it would cost, you know, more money than you had extra. Not only was your money being spread thinner but there were more things to buy, so you had to begin to be selective about your purchases. You simply didn't have any easy money anymore.

MARK: *Well, am I correct in assuming...between '75 and '85 the underground market, you know, shrank compared to what it was in '72?*

RON: Yes, but it shrank specifically because of '73, 74, and then it went back up again.

MARK: *When?*

RON: In '75

MARK: *To what, like half of what it had been? Three quarters?*

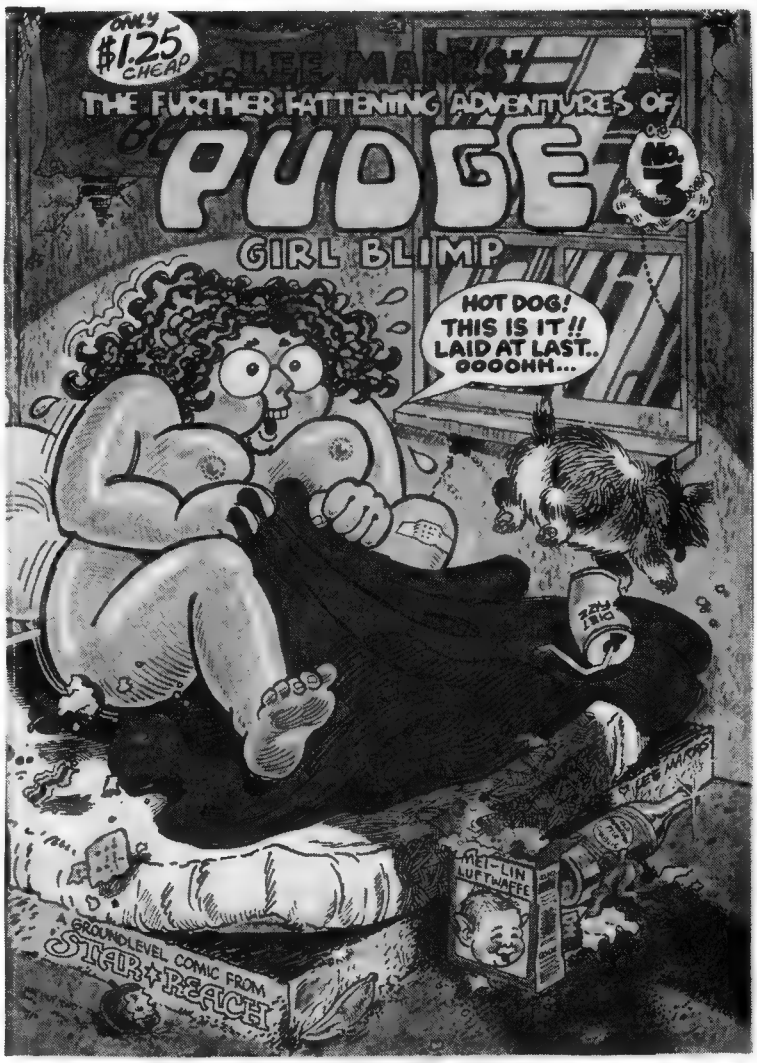
RON: Well, again, you can't compare it exactly, because you can't compare a new artist's work with somebody else's old art. You can compare by numbers but *also* you're charging them $1.00 a book instead of 50¢ a book, you know. I think the first 75¢ underground comic — and everybody screamed when I did this — it was IMAGE OF THE BEAST, the first illustrating **Tim Boxel** did. Everybody says, "Ah! 75¢, nobody'll buy this. Comics are supposed to be 50¢." And you say, "Yeah, but it used to cost us 6¢ to print 'em, now it's up to 12¢." You know, those few pennies make all the difference in the world. And what I found was that that was, like, the greatest crisis — there in like '73, '74 — and then things perked back up and we've had several comics in that bunch that have sold as much as others.

MARK: *ZIPPY THE PINHEAD?*

RON: Yeah, 30,000 or 40,000 copies of those things. You know, that's fair. A lot of the new, experimental people...you have to also remember that there was a lot of things published that weren't very good, in that rush to get everyone out to satisfy the market, and so when there was a big glut some people got burnt. They felt like they'd bought things that were real trash. I see right now the very, very, very same situation happening with the alternatives.

MARK: *The mainstream alternatives?*

RON: The mainstream alternatives right now. I just looked at all these different things and they had so many different funny animal parodies of Japanese warmonger comics — you know, TEENAGE NINJA BERRY PICKERS. Some of them were pretty funny when they began — I mean, you look at the NINJA TURTLE stuff and that's pretty funny and looks pretty good — but suddenly we have a parody of the parody, and then we have a parody of the parody of the parody.



Lee Marrs' THE FURTHER FATTENING ADVENTURES OF PUDGE, GIRL BLIMP, published in 1977 by Mike Friedrich's Star*Reach Productions. Those of you wondering what Star*Reach is currently doing, see our cover feature!

MARK: *KANGAROOS?*

RON: Yeah. I talked to **Lee Mars** about the KANGAROOS and we were laughing about, you know, "Gee, the KANGAROOS are selling as much in one issue as PUDGE, THE GIRL BLIMP sold in three issues way back when." You know, that's pretty funny, but then we also said, "But gee, doesn't this sound and sorta smell like the old days when all of a sudden there were so many of these things out there?" At a certain point, the market just says —

MARK: *The balloon went bust.*

RON: Yeah. Well, I don't wanna see another one of these things — I want something new — and I have a *feeling* that's going to happen. Now hopefully, for all those people involved, it won't. It will go on like this forever and, you know, it will be a little bank there, their money is forever and they'll never know the begrudging...I mean, you know, there's a lot of shiny, bright young faces — some old, gnarly faces, too — running around the convention who are, you know, making bucks drawing all of this parody stuff; but I looked at some of it and it was really pisspoor. It was *not* good art and the

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"All of the artists had cancer. . ."

storylines were atrocious. I like the ones where things are targeted. I read GNAT RAT. That was a hilarious parody of BATMAN. And I remember Julie was sitting right over at the DC booth across from us —

MARK: *Julie Schwartz?*

RON: Yeah, and somebody had showed me the GNAT RAT parody; I said, "Go show it to DC." They hadn't seen it yet and it was really fun, I was able to watch them all looking at it . . . and they asked the guy who brought the thing, you know, like being the bringer of bad news, where he got it or something — I couldn't make out what they were saying — and then he pointed over at *me* and they thought *I* did it, and I'm just shrugging my shoulders and laughing.

MARK: *It sounds like they were a little uptight.*

RON: Well, comic companies in America always have the problem of identity. No matter what they do, everybody implies that it's at best an adolescent thing and probably will never be more than a child's thing — this comic-book art — and that's the worst thing for a comic company who's trying to really go for the adult market in a big way. They have to contend with that, because where their heart is, is really out there with the adults, 'cause they're all adults. They're adults working in this field and they want recognition for, you know, saying something contemporary and astounding and interesting. They want to be judged by their literary prowess and not this sprawl of children which they unfortunately have the feeling that they are — and, in fact, a lot of people do judge them that way. This country's never accepted them as an adult medium.

MARK: *My nephew wants to ask you a question.*

RON: Yeah?

JULIAN BURGER: What do you publish for young adults under 18?

RON: Well, we just did a wonderful book on **The Monkees**. Do you know **The Monkees?**

JULIAN: Yeah.

RON: Yeah, that's the second book. We did a first book called THE MONKEES' TALE, and we have THE MONKEES' SCRAPBOOK now which is the second book. What we find is that the fans for that book are between the ages of 10 and 20. Have you ever followed them? Do you ever watch them on the reruns, **The Monkees?**

JULIAN: Yeah, I have.

RON: Did you like it?

JULIAN: Yeah.

RON: So, we do things like that. In terms of comic art . . . well, although I think the parents should tell the kids what they can and cannot read in the house — that dictatorship of the family holds true — we find a lot of kids enjoy reading underground comics. But I think it should always be done with supervision. I think the kids that pick it up because it's the only chance they'll ever have to see something sexual, that bespeaks of a problem within their family more than it does the focus in our comics. But we have a lot of comics which really are . . . I'd say, like, one-third of our comics have explicit sexual things in them, and that's something that should be worked out within a family as to how and where information about sex should come from. That's not for us to decide. That's why we put "adults only" on the cover. About half of our comics have violence or drug references. That, again I feel just as strongly, should be for the family to work out. But we do believe in your right to read it provided that you work it through your family.

© 1979 S. Clay Wilson

"Bums and the Bird-Spirit," by S. Clay Wilson, from ZAP #10.

THE BUMS WERE STANDING AROUND.. KILLING TIME.. THEMSELVES.. BELCHING.. SCRATCHING.. FARTING.. PUKING.. PASSING THE JUG.. PASSING OUT..
HOBOS IN MY SHOES
NOSE BASH BLUES

"I was one of the first Peace Corps

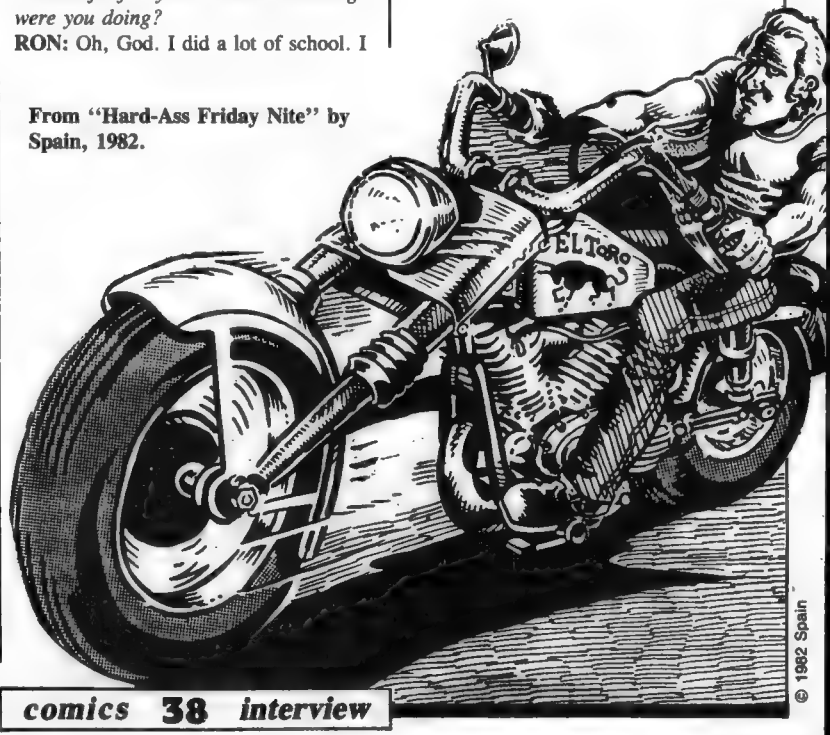
MARK: *Do you think your mom would let you read that stuff?*
JULIAN: It depends.
RON: Yeah. Would you like your mom to read it?
JULIAN: I don't know.
RON: Well, we've done comics on how to recycle automobile parts and put cars together. We've done comics on ecology. The last issue of SLOW DEATH all of the artists had or expected to get the cancers they wrote about — it was the cancer issue — so it was a very, very hard hitting, solid look at cancer from a perspective of people who it was affecting. One of the SLOW DEATHs was an anti-war issue. It was all true war stories, which we wanted to be as grim and real as possible.

We've done books on the history of American Indians. We did a whole bunch of things by **Jaxon** — COMANCHE MOON. That's another book which I think was really good for young adults. It gives you a little more of the heritage of the country. We did some on the Texas/Mexican Wars.

MARK: *A lot of people that I knew in the late '60s and '70s who used to read underground comics — I'm not sure if they're either not aware that there still are underground comics or if they feel it's somehow a part of the past. Do you meet up with that kind of reaction in general, that people seem to relate underground comics specifically to the '60s and '70s?*

RON: People stuck undergrounds with what was going on in the Summer of Love in '67. I always maintained that it really wasn't full blown until the very end of that decade, but people had a great *need* to be identified with the '60s. Now, I can tell you that most people were sitting on their thumbs *until* about '67. The '60s really didn't get happening until then and what most people really experienced, where they really got into things, it's really more like from 1970 to 1973 or '74.

MARK: *Maybe I should rethink this question. Okay, in 1970 I was 16 and I was reading undergrounds, so now I'm 32 and I'm still reading the stuff and —*
RON: You never grew up, did you. *(Laughter.)*
MARK: *I guess not. Are most of your readers the people who are of my generation, in their early 30s, or are the new yuppie kind of people, who are like 16 to 18, reading them too?*
RON: I came from a heavy background, experimental psychology in the area of research design — experimental design was my specialty — and so for fun I did some early work, when I was just publishing comics, that tried to identify who the people were, so I had a pretty good idea then; and then just casual samples, nothing official now, I think it's pretty much the same kind of person. I think now we have an older audience than we used to, and that's because we have a large group of people who read them back then and if they find them now they still read them. I mean, back then a comic would be read by at least 20 people. One comic would go around.
MARK: *High pass around.*
RON: High pass around. Now it's about five or six.
MARK: *Because of changes in communal living or —*
RON: Partially that. There's also been — what some people have missed — is all the very great, interesting artwork that came out in the undergrounds has been successfully siphoned off into the commercial processes. I for awhile could just pick up a magazine and see, *a-ha*, they're copying that artist or they're copying this artist. The ad agencies were not dumb. They'd see what were the hottest or most interesting things and they'd use it, so to get hot graphics by the mid '70s you could pick up anything from a PLAYBOY to, late '70s, HUSTLER and you'd get underground comics style all through it, so it lost uniqueness. There wasn't just one place you got it.
MARK: *How did you get into publishing initially? You said you worked on the railroad for five years. What other things were you doing?*
RON: Oh, God. I did a lot of school. I was in the Peace Corps for a couple of years. I was one of the first volunteers. I went to Sri Lanka.
MARK: *In the '60s.*
RON: This was like in 1962 to '64. I first worked on the railroad in '59 and then I worked also in '64 to '67 on the railroad. And, oh, I've managed drive-in movie theaters and sold fireworks. I've done just about a little bit of everything, I think. I sold radio time.
MARK: *So you came in sort of like a seller, rather than a comic fan?*
RON: No. I came in strictly as a comics fan. I had comic books as a kid. I was a collector, but I didn't know other people did this.
MARK: *Me, too.*
RON: I was very insulated from other people, and when I was about 11 years old I had Dell #1 through #500 or something like this, and I heard on the radio that the Valley Children's Hospital needed comic books for the poor kids in the hospital so I thought, "Hey, they're just rotting away here," so I trucked 'em on down there and gave 'em away, feeling like I did a really good deed for an 11-year-old. I could have bought the hospital now if I'd hung onto 'em! *(Laughter.)* I began reading ECs about then and I sort of hung onto them, and a friend who ended up being a judge stole my EC collection.
MARK: *Leave it to the judge.*
RON: Really. ECs were great. If you want to see today what ECs were like and



From "Hard-Ass Friday Nite" by Spain, 1982.

volunteers. I went to Sri Lanka."

how they affected kids then, look at the Garbage Pail Kids. What's happening with Garbage Pail Kids is exactly what happened with MAD MAGAZINE to the same age group back then.

MARK: *What are the Garbage Pail Kids?*

RON: These are gum cards. Julian'll tell you about'em. You don't like Garbage Pail Kids?

JULIAN: Hgh.

RON: How old are you?

JULIAN: Fourteen.

RON: Ah, I see, you're just out of the age group. But if you were 11, you might like 'em. If you were 8, you would *love* them.

MARK: *Do your friends like them?*

JULIAN: Yeah.

RON: Yeah, 'cause they're real gross, aren't they?

JULIAN: Yeah. They're stupid.

MARK: They're gross and stupid.

RON: It's interesting how things go along and the batons are passed. **Art Speigelman**, who does RAW is the creator of Garbage Pail Kids, and **John Pound**, who does a whole bunch of things including the covers for COMMIES FROM MARS, is the artist on the Garbage Pail Kids. At the comic convention I saw that the value of them, like an uncut sheet was going for $50. the first day of the convention and it went up to like $200. at the end. So it's really a big collectible thing, I think, for kids, but it also it really gives fine art back to the youth for a change, and it does so in a form of parody that is great, too, 'cause it just shows all of these awful things — and they're able to get a lot of anti-war messages into the imagery. I'm really following that. I think that's a wonderful thing. And parent groups are up in arms about them, they want them banned. Cabbage Patch Kids have sued them for, you know, for trying to make too much fun of them or whatever it is. I can't support it more, it's wonderful.

MARK: *You're in a unique position to offer your insight as to . . . well, you've been involved with the underground comics scene now for at least 15 years.*

RON: Yeah. Seventeen.

MARK: *You know, there's a lot of fear among people my age, in their early 30s, as to the Moral Majority and conservatives and banning, you know, HUCK FINN. What are your feelings about that?*

RON: I translated a proverb out of Arabic once — when I had nothing better to do, sitting over in South Asia; I was going through all of these Arabic things and I was teaching at a Muslim training college — and it came out roughly translated, you know, the **Prophet Mohammed** said, "Trust in Allah but tie your camel." *(Laughter.)* So, I think it's always good, when you have right-wingers on a roll, to cover your backside.

MARK: *How do you do that?*

RON: Well, fortunately, we have still a few laws remaining in the books. Recently, the state supreme court I think upheld . . . well, anyway, there's a new interpretation of the clause where you judge a work, a creative work, you judge it by community standards. I think you're talking about what to do about these obscenity things and declaring if something is not good for the moral —

MARK: *And rock lyrics.*

RON: Yes. What they did is they chang-

© 1982 Spain

"You judge obscenity by the community."

ed it from your local community to the statewide community.

MARK: *Now, is that a play off the Ginsberg trial, the issue of obscenity?*

RON: No. No. Our comics are, again, they're more literary and they're more a graphic novella than anything else. If we were taking, like, photo-novellas, like clear glossy photos of nudes and sexually active people, I think we'd run more risk with the Moral Majority now than we do.

MARK: *Because you're art?*

RON: Well, it's like the other night we were described — they had something on NIGHTLINE...no, was that the DONAHUE thing that was on all evening long?

MARK: *Whatever, it was network TV.*

RON: It was network TV and they were doing it every night for one whole week.

JULIAN: THE HUMAN ANIMAL.

RON: Did you watch a lot of those?

JULIAN: Just one of them.

RON: Was it the one dealing with drugs?

JULIAN: I don't remember.

RON: Well, there was one that dealt with drugs, and one of the things that this woman who was a...I would describe her as right winger — but she pointed out, of all the things that she could have said there, she said, "And there are some very clever people out there who are manipulating the minds of our children with their publications," and she mentioned R.I.P. SNORTING COCAINE COMICS as an example.

MARK: *Which you publish.*

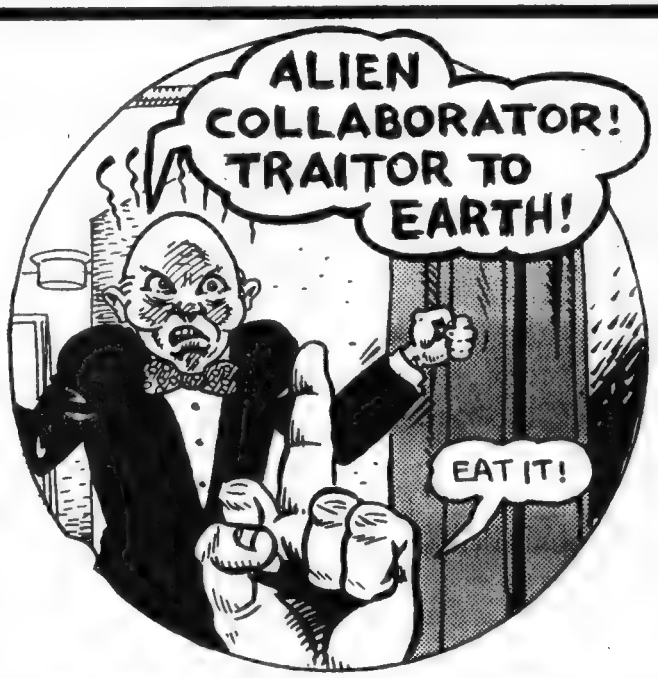
RON: Which I publish! And I thought, "That dummy, she didn't even look at the cover properly." R.I.P. is most commonly understood to mean rest in peace and it's our way of saying cocaine is a death trip, you know — and if she'd ever bothered to read the stories, almost all of them certainly don't imply much joy or fun with cocaine.

MARK: *And there's a skull right there on the cover.*

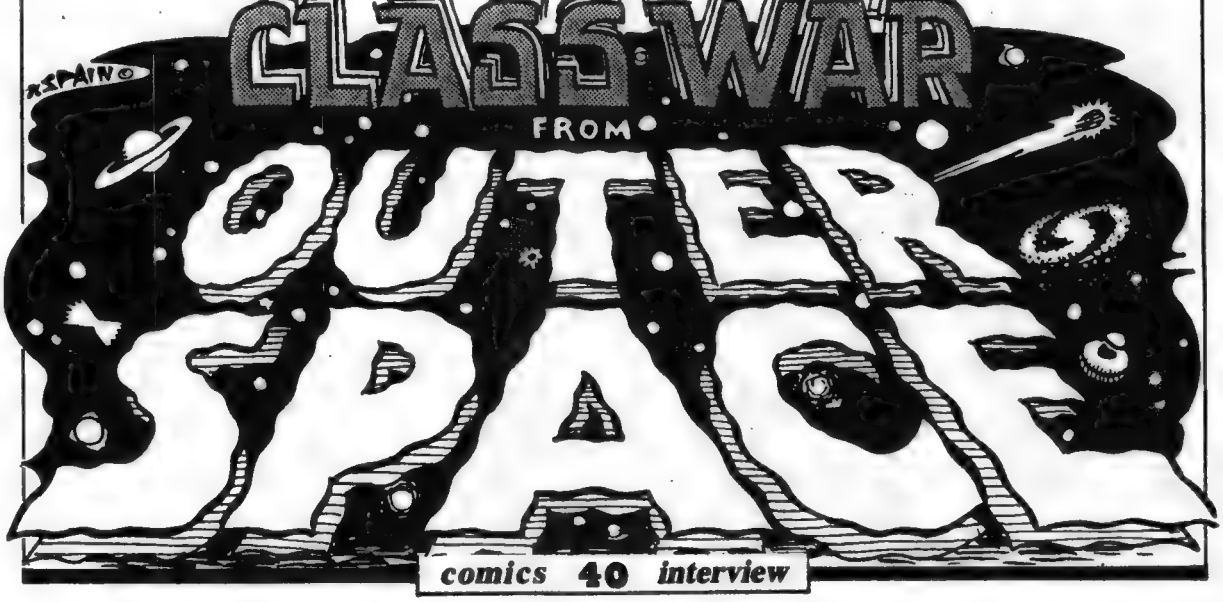
RON: Yeah! If you notice there's a lot of snow on top of his forehead. That's the first issue there. Anyway, so no matter what you do — you're right — you have to keep a look out because these people will say, "*A-ha*! The comic says cocaine therefore it must be pro!" That's the problem at the moment. It's kind of the witch-hunt mentality. "She's a witch! Burn her at the stake!"

MARK: *But you don't seem to feel like there's a —*

RON: Well, they're gonna do what they wanta do. We'll fight back with whatever we can. I'm not going to stop what I'm doing. At the same time, I don't think it's a good idea to wave a red flag in Ed Meese's face, you know, and say I dare ya. We're just a tiny little publishing company, you know. How could we possibly take on the megalithic American government?



Tim Boxell presents Spain's "Class War from Outer Space" in COMMIES FROM MARS #5, from 1986.



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"R. Crumb continues to amaze and stun."

MARK: *But you don't get worried that you'd have to close up shop tomorrow if we got too conservative and everything was banned?*

RON: Well, I don't know. If it got to that, I suppose we'd see who amongst those who use the name "underground press" would continue really *being* an underground press. I mean, we started out and got the name because the things were sold under the table, you know, supposedly; I mean, like, a lot of places were very fearful of it, and that fear has dissipated, but then you still had the lower half of females being airbrushed in every men's magazine at that same time and now they're more like shots that you couldn't find in a gynecologist's back drawer.

MARK: *In men's magazines.*

RON: In men's magazines, yeah. So by comparison, things have come so far that way — I mean you could never . . . an art movie was if you saw a couple at sunset in a silhouette in an embrace supposedly nude with their wastes underwater, that was considered pretty risque back in the late '60s even though people were, like, running around naked and having orgies and whatever. It's like the government constantly . . . well, I shouldn't say this . . . but there are certain people who can use the power of the government to put their views on top of everybody else. Those are the people to be afraid of. The government is no more than a conduit for those who wish to have power, you know. Those people want to do things to you. It's not the government. The government's just there. It's something to use and it's a facility for things. It's these people that are very dangerous.

You have to remember that **Ed Meese** gained favoritism with **Reagan** when **Reagan** was governor in California by being the one to devise how to arrest mass quantities of people who were walking down to the Oakland induction center and saying stop the damn draft. Ed figured out ways to bend the laws around because he was the D.A. in Oakland. He was a logician. He knew how to round 'em up and put 'em in busses and haul 'em out to Santa Rita — prison camp out there — and keep 'em in prison for three or four days; laying on the ground spread-eagled or with cuffs on for six to twelve hours, make them, you know, feel a little dirt in their faces. Didn't violate any laws, didn't lay a glove on them, you know, but he certainly knew how to control large masses of people and made the first big mass arrests in political situations and got those people off the streets so they were unable to come back — even though the same numbers and greater numbers came back in again. They also had an unlimited amount of busses and cops that they called in from all of the various communities. So that's where **Meese** got his favoritism with **Reagan,** and he's gone on and now is our Attorney General of the United States. I was actually surprised that they didn't nominate him for the Supreme Court.

MARK: *I think we're coming to the end of the tape, so let me ask you what's doing with Last Gasp today. Where are you at now?*

RON: Well, I think where we're at now is, we're continuing to publish a lot of work by **Bill Griffith**, who is becoming much, *much,* more popular. He's in about 40 national daily newspapers now.

MARK: *With ZIPPY?*

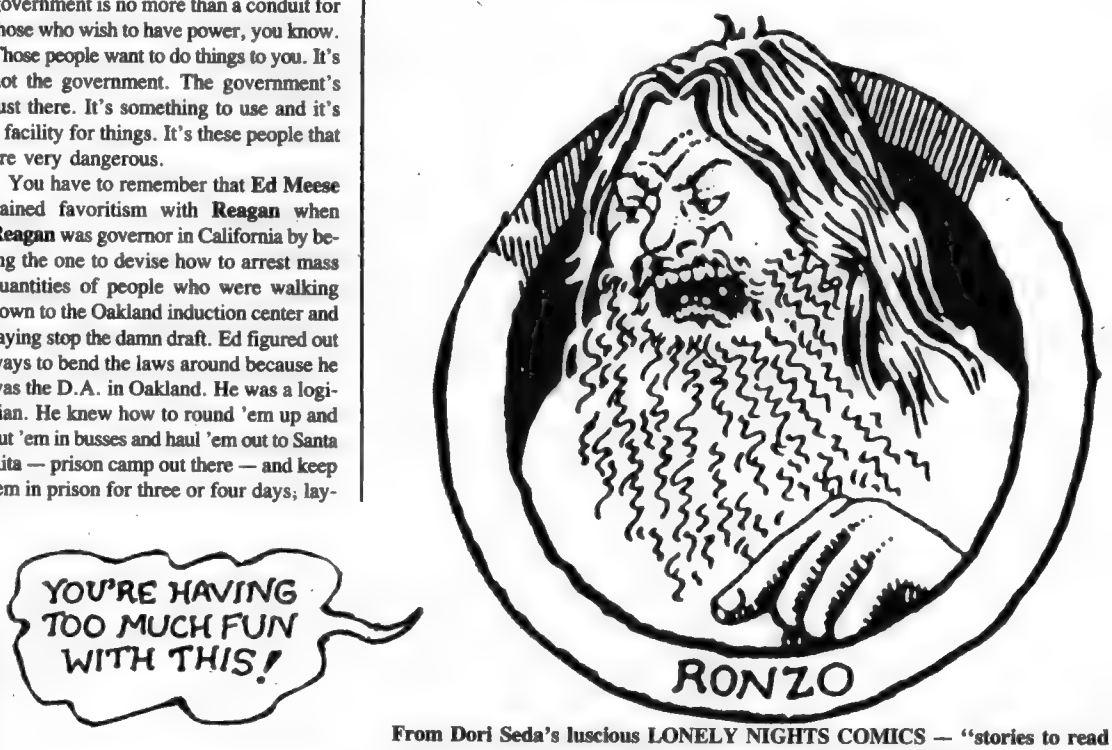
RON: With ZIPPY. He's going great guns. It's really wonderful to see. Again, this is more where you see that ZIPPY was an underground comic ten years ago and he's in the daily paper today for 50 million Americans.

MARK: *I'm really amazed. I remember when he was an underground.*

RON: Yeah. And then we have **Robert Crumb** who continues to amaze and stun with all of his work. He started his magazine WEIRDO, which we were blessed to be able to produce for him, and we publish it. And we've taken over the art of the ZAP comics and we're bringing all of those back into print.

MARK: *In the original form?*

RON: Yeah! So we've printed about 20 different underground comics that were out of print, and our publishing schedule has remained pretty constant since — we've published between eight and twelve new comics a year and we've done that since 1974. And people say, "Oh, it all died." I really feel that some people were serving their own interests by saying it died because they didn't want to be identified with underground comics. They felt that that was like an albatross around their neck. They weren't able to sell their product if it was identified as underground but if they could identify it as, oh, new wave or something else, then they could sell it better. It's not true. It's the same stuff and it sells the same. So comics continue to go.



From Dori Seda's luscious LONELY NIGHTS COMICS — "stories to read when the couple next door is fucking too loud." From 1986.

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"Our function is to act as a supplier

A MESSAGE TO RETAILERS ABOUT CENSORSHIP

OUR LIVELIHOODS ARE UNDER ATTACK. Citizens groups are organizing to ban roleplaying games because they fear some of the elements of fantasy play. Other groups are trying to have major literary works removed from the shelves of school libraries. Closer to home, some distributors do not carry full lines of merchandise because they feel some materials are morally objectionable, or because they fear possible consequences.

We feel that any attack on the breadth of merchandise you can carry limits the ability of *all* of us to make a living, whether now or in the future. You only have to look at the effect the Kefauver hearings had on comic sales in the early 50's to see what *could* happen now.

Capital City urges you to support efforts to *stop censorship*. We also suggest that you buy from a distributor that doesn't censor the material you can buy. Capital City carries a *full line* of underground comics, ground level comics, and graphic albums for adults. *You* are the one who should make the decision about what to sell, not your distributor.

Buy from Capital City — The Distribution Professionals.℠

for retail stores. We take a risk. . . ”

MILTON GRIEPP

Milton and Mary Beth Griepp as Lurch & the Biker Nun, Halloween '86.

Distributors. If you want the lowdown, see DAK's editorial in INTERVIEW #37. And now, here to present an eloquent case against an impromptu necktie-party thrown by publishers, is a co-owner of one of the "big two" in direct sales distribution, Capital City. . .

MARK BORAX: *What does a distributor do?*

MILTON GRIEPP: Our function is to act as a supplier for retail stores. To do that, the first step is finding the merchandise. To do that we attend trade shows, including many outside our industry, such as the Hobby Industry of America show, the Toy Fair, the American Booksellers Association. We advertise both within and outside of the comics field in order to bring our name before possible suppliers' eyes.

Once we develop a relationship with a publisher or discover a product line, we then solicit our retailers to determine how many copies they would like. It is done in this way — firm sales — because the direct distribution system is based on no returns at a slightly higher discount than the ID distribution system operates under, and so we solicit in advance.

Our retailer customers take a risk in ordering in that they're never *exactly* sure how something is going to sell, and then we take a risk in whatever we order extra, and as a result the publishers give us a slightly higher discount because we are taking the risk instead of them.

So, we get our orders from our customers, we place our orders with our publishers or other manufacturers or whatever, bring in the product, and then break it down into the retailer/customer level and ship it. Organization of shipping is one of our big jobs. Getting merchandise into our warehouses and out to the retailers as fast as possible is the core of what we do.

"Our order form recently described one

METERS BELOW THE SURFACE IN A TITANIUM-SHIELDED BUNKER.
THAT'S IT, MILT. THEY'RE HEADED THIS WAY. I'M OUTTA HERE. I'M HISTORY
JOHN! YOU CAN'T LEAVE ME! I DON'T HAVE A RIDE!
IT'S BEEN FUN, MILT. AND I'M GRATEFUL.
BUT TWO GUCCI QUATROS BREATHING DOWN YOUR NECK? HEY, I'M OUTTA HERE.
BOOM
NOBODY RUNS OUT ON ME, YUP YUP YUP DON'TCHA KNOW, HEY!

Milton Griepp and John Davis, owners of Capital City Distribution, reveal the secret formula of their unique business partnership. From NEXUS #33, by Mike Baron, Steve (the Dude) Rude, and John Nyberg. Published by First Comics.

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MARK: *In the comics industry there are two types of distributors, direct distributors and the indirect distributors or IDs, right?*

MILTON: ID stands for independent distributor, and that would refer to the newsstand type distributors — the Charles Levys in Chicago, Hudson County News on the east coast, Golden Gate Distributors on the west coast.

MARK: *And for a long time all there was was the IDs, there wasn't any direct distributors?*

MILTON: Yes. **Phil Seuling** invented this business in the early '70s by going to the publishers and suggesting to them that they were taking an enormous amount of waste by only selling one copy for every three they printed and that he could sell them in a non-returnable fashion to collector stores that could also sell them as back issues if they do not sell them as new issues, and from what he started it snowballed into something that is now probably approximately half of the total nationwide comic market.

MARK: *Do you see it ever growing to encompass more than half of the nationwide comic-sales market?*

MILTON: I think the trend is in that direction. There are some types of outlets where it's not feasible for a direct distributor to service — for example, a convenience store with a 50-pocket spinner that sells seven X-MEN and five SPIDER-MANs and six G.I. JOEs and seven SUPERMANs. The ID-type distributor gets economies of scale, because they're dropping off COSMO and VOGUE and TIME and NEWSWEEK at the same stop, with the same delivery, the same order. For a comic distributor to attempt to service a rack as the IDs do and at that buying level, it would just not be profitable, so although the trend is in the direction of a greater market share for the direct side of the business, I do not predict that IDs will ever be entirely out of it.

MARK: *How many distributors are there in the comic-book industry?*

MILTON: I ADD, the distributors association — which bases its membership on being direct with either of the big two, publishers, Marvel and DC — has 18 members, and that's actually . . . that's international; there's three or four from Canada and one from the U.K. included in that number.

MARK: *To readers out there who have no idea what goes on behind the scenes, how do the distributors advertise what they have to offer to their retailers each month?*

MILTON: We send out a monthly order form, which contains items for a future month. For example, as we speak, we are currently collecting orders for books that will come out about two months from now. Capital City Distribution sends an order form each month of approximately 50 pages listing anywhere from 700 to 1,000 items, and the cycle that we work under is such that we need to have our orders to our manufacturers for, let's say, January shipping books around the first of December.

MARK: *Where does the distributor make his money?*

MILTON: On the spread between what we pay publishers and what we charge the retailers. The spread is very narrow. A standard in the industry would be for a distributor to buy at 60% off retail and sell to a retailer at 40%-55% off retail, so that spread is very narrow. We have to operate on volume and we have to make very few mistakes in order to survive.

MARK: *What kind of factors go into deciding on the percentage that you offer the retailers, because there are different percentages available to different retailers, right?*

MILTON: Yes. Most distributors — in fact, all that I can think of — operate on a sliding scale based on volume, so the smaller stores buy at 40% off retail and the larger stores have 55% off retail.

MARK: *Currently, some retailers are worried that the black-and-white comics glut has bottomed out. How can they ever know what to order amidst the hopeless sea of titles? What does Capital City do to help that, or do you even think that that's a valid fear?*

MILTON: It's a very valid fear. We did an analysis recently that showed that in 1986 the number of black-and-white titles on our order form had quadrupled and that the number of color titles had gone up, I think, approximately 30%, leading to soliciting in December for a total of — comic output, not including any magazines or books or anything else — but a total

book as 'fannish but not execrable.'"

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comic output from the publishers of nearly 400 titles. It's very difficult, especially for a retailer to order, especially when there are so many new publishers entering the field that we are not familiar with. People know pretty much what to expect from a Marvel or DC product, or a First or an Eclipse, because they have seen enough products. A new publisher that they are not familiar with, with perhaps an unfamiliar artist and writer, a new property, they're really shooting in the dark.

What we do is try to inform our retailers. First of all, we distribute for the publishers or manufacturers promotional material that they provide us, which usually consists of fliers which have some cover art or interior art. We also, unlike many other distributors, include our own description of each product in our order form. In that description, we attempt to be as honest as possible. In some cases, the publishers don't like us for that, but we feel that our retailers are better off being informed and not ordering too much of a bad product than they would be if they'd buy too many and get stuck with them. For example, I noticed that the person that writes our order form recently had one black-and-white described as "fannish but not execrable." *(Laughter.)* And so it can range from high praise on art to a description that, you know, says that there are probably some completists out there that will want this, but don't count on impulse sales.

MARK: *So the retailer really has no way of knowing what to choose, unless the distributors provide them with samples of art or written descriptions of what you have to offer?*

MILTON: Except for contacts that the retailers make themselves at occasions such as trade shows, where they can talk to the publishers and see what they have coming out in the future, yes, the only conduit is with their distributor. Trade advertising would be another one, I guess.

MARK: *So there is probably a lot of heat on how you print up your tip sheet?*

MILTON: Right. We don't do a tip sheet in the sense that we recommend how many to order. We provide information that we try to make as complete as possible to allow the retailers to make their own decisions. For example, some distributors say to order 75% of your order on WATCHMEN on this title. We don't do that. We might describe the art as being, you know, nearly as good as WATCHMEN caliber or something like that, but we don't do a tip sheet of that sort, so the retailers do pretty much depend on the descriptions that they get from us.

MARK: *How do you come up with those descriptions?*

MILTON: We have two people who rate different sections of the order form. One person rates the comics section and another rates everything else. The source for that information is information from the publishers, which *especially* with the new ones is sometimes difficult to obtain. Our people spend a lot of time — when we're putting the order form together — calling to get clarification on information, and occasionally publishers will try to solicit a title without information on who is doing art or the story and we have to track down that information. It's a difficult and time consuming job. The larger publishers have gotten very good at providing us with the advance information, so that they have a description of each title in their solicitations that we paraphrase. The smaller publishers tend to be the problem areas.

MARK: *And there are a whole lot of smaller publishers these days?*

MILTON: Yes. We counted in our November order form that we solicited for 61 black-and-white issue #1s.

MARK: *How many of those 61-black-and-white #1s are gonna make it to black-and-white #5?*

MILTON: I don't have a crystal ball, but I will say that a significant percentage of them will not. Some of them may never see #1. We have had a lot of publishers contact us through this black-and-white craze, solicit for titles, and notify us three or four months later, "Well, we're not gonna come out with it." Or in some cases, they see their orders and decide not to come out with it.

MARK: *Let's say a new distributor comes to town, what do they do to try and get business away from the other distributors? What kind of deals do they offer?*

MILTON: Well, 1986 was a very competitive year at the distribution level. For example, one thing that most areas of the country are now seeing is the books that ship out of Ronald's Printing in Montreal much sooner than they had in the past, and that is a result of distributors beginning to move those books into their distribution system at their own expense to gain an edge over competition by having them earlier. Now, of course, a lot of people are doing it, so the edge doesn't exist, but that's an example.

Timeliness is of primary importance in this business at the retail level and at the distributor level. Consumers will drive across town to get a book that's two hours or half-a-day earlier than at another store, and as a result the retailers — their livelihoods depending on it — are very conscious of this timeliness as well, and

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A page of artist DELL BARRAS's exquisite pencil renderings of this clash between two generations of superhero is reproduced at right.

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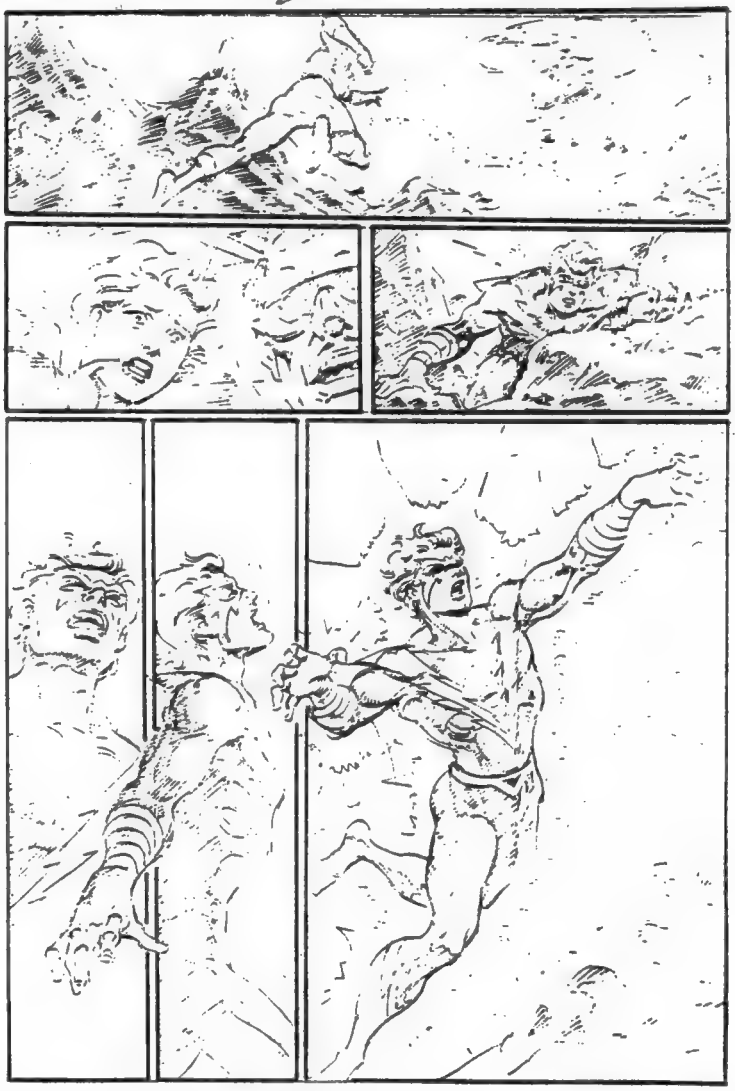

Story ©1987 Roy & Dann Thomas
Artwork ©1987 Dell Barras

"Retailers order fairly conservatively."

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they communicate that back to the distributors, who have become very time conscious also. I can't *think* of an area that has as efficient a distribution system as comics does, with the possible exception of something like fresh fish or produce. There's nothing like it in durable goods anywhere. It's a model of efficiency. The fact is that in almost every major metropolitan area in the country retailers have books on their shelves within 48 hours of when they leave the printer's doors. It's incredible.

MARK: *How does that compare to magazines?*

MILTON: Magazines generally operate with an "on-sale" date which is adhered to in varying degrees by the IDs. They have a target date that they have for distribution and, when they get a product in, they set it up to go out on the release date, presumably. Some IDs jump those release dates. Some don't. Some jump them on some titles and not others. But the lag time . . . if you look at, for example, the lag time on the comic books that are distributed by the IDs, we have seen situations with a vast range of timeliness. For example, in Phoenix there have been occasions over the summer where the ID had comic books on convenience store racks the day after we had them out in the comic-book stores. That is the most efficient I have ever seen. The least efficient would probably be four to six weeks from the release date, when they hit the stands.

In discussing the direct sales market and the efficiencies that must be achieved in sell-through in order to make a profit, one area that is of *critical* importance to retailers and publishers and distributors is the availability of books for reorders. Retailers tend to order fairly conservatively on most titles, because they can't afford to get stuck. Distributors, who have a much narrower margin to work with, also tend to order fairly conservatively. So Capital City has spent considerable effort in coming up with a system to gauge our over-orders on comics, which are our orders beyond what we have pre-sold but we believe we will sell as reorders. No system is perfect. There are always going to be hot books that everybody has sold out of. There are always going to be the stinkers that people are stuck with. But what we've done is establish an inventory flow monitoring system which tracks our reorder activity for the first ten days after release on every color title in each of our warehouse locations. That's based on an inventory after the books are pre-sold and then another inventory ten days later. We take those figures and calculate reorder activity as a percentage of initial order and base our order on the next month's issue of that title on the percentage of reorders as initial sales that we got the previous issue, then obviously we put in the override percentages that are necessary if there has been a major change in the creative team or contents or issue number. For example, we're usually not going to sell as many extras on a #3 as we do on a #1.

MARK: *So Capital City has initiated a program where you can keep better track of what's moving so that, next time, you can give publishers and retailers ideas of how they can better use your services, is that what it amounts to?*

MILTON: This system I've just described is an internal one which we use to gauge our over-orders on books. We also do provide a lot of information to our retailers based on our company-wide sales information. We publish a listing each month which ranks all of the color titles solicited for that month not only in rank but in relative sales value, so the stores can know that if they're selling 100 X-MEN they can sell that month, say, 90 BATMANs. Or in some months, if they've sold 100 X-MEN they know that, industry wide, people are selling 200 MAN OF STEELs for every 100 X-MEN they ordered. So we provide that information. We also publish reprinted best-seller lists of games and science-fiction paperbacks, which are produced by other publications which we reprint with permission. We also publish a newsletter which provides news stories on the industry, news and market changes, and we also publish our own figures of what the publishers' total market shares are for all the accounts we sell to; for example, the average dollars in color comics. Marvel would account for 40%-45%, DC from 25%-30%, and so on down.

MARK: *The distributor kind of walks a narrow balance between the publisher on the one hand and the retailer on the other. What are some of the hazards of walking that balance? What are some of the places where you can slip up and get either side kind of upset?*

MILTON: Well, there are three sets of concerns to be balanced: Our own, which is to continue operating, to grow, to make

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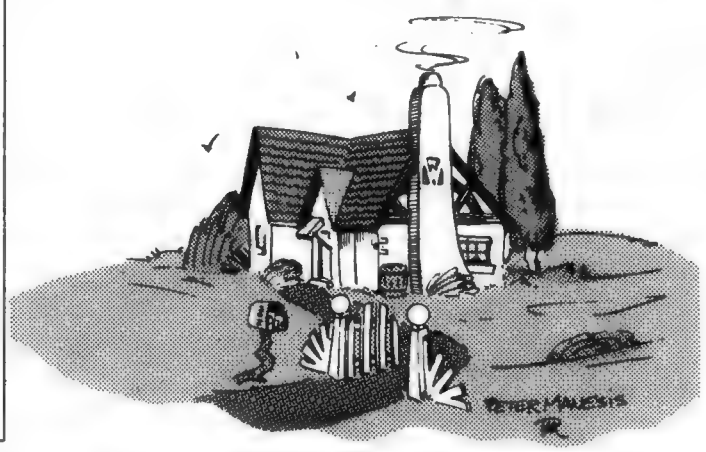

THE WESTFIELD COMPANY

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"MIRACLEMAN would not have been a problem."

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a profit; the retailers; whose primary concerns usually are competitive ones with his competition; and the publishers; who want to sell as much product as possible. An example of a place where we would be caught in the middle would be where a publisher solicits for a product as having certain contents and creative staff but ships it with *different* contents and creative staff; the retailers realizing when they get it that their order was not accurate, that they ordered either fewer or more than they can sell because of the erroneous listing of the contents, and then coming to us and saying "I've gotta have more" or "I can't sell these, I have to do something with them." Then we have to go to the publisher and say, "You didn't provide us with accurate information. Our retailers are upset."

In the case of something that was worse than originally solicited for, they want to return it, and we would like for the publisher to make some accommodations to that, because we feel they have a responsibility to give accurate information to the people that buy from them. The publishers that have been in business the longest trend to have very forward-thinking policies on an issue like that. They will, for example, take returns on a book that's significantly different from what it was solicited as. Again, it tends to be the newer publishers that the most problems occur with.

MARK: *Didn't something like that happen recently with Alan Moore's MIRACLEMAN?*

MILTON: Yes, We solicited for MIRACLEMEN #9 in the late spring and the book was solicited to us as having a **Frank Miller** cover and a NEW WAVE insert (because MIRACLEMAN #9 was supposed to come out before NEW WAVE) as a promotional item, and made no mention of any material that might be too graphic for younger readers. When the book arrived, it did not have a **Frank Miller** cover, it did not have a NEW WAVE insert, and it *had* material that most would consider too graphic for younger readers, so that was a problem.

MARK: *When that problem arises the retailers obviously are probably the first ones to raise a ruckus.*

MILTON: In the case of MIRACLEMAN #9 we have not had a huge number of retailers clamoring to return the book. We *have* taken returns from retailers that wanted to return it to us. Eclipse said on a case-by-case basis they would work with us if it was a large problem for us.

MARK: *I assume we're not going to see less adult content in the future. It seems like the trend is for more adult content in comic books.*

MILTON: Whether it's a bigger percentage of what's being sold, I don't know. There are more titles of that type but there are more titles of every type. We have always carried what used to be called underground comics, some of which had material of...sexual content. Those publishers that have seen before the kinds of swings on pornography that we are now experiencing are very good about labeling their books "adults only" and letting us know that these books are going to be for adults only. I would say there are going to be more titles, but whether it's a bigger percentage or not is in question.

MARK: *So the problem from the distributor's point of view seems to be not that there is adult or questionable material coming in but, if it comes in, that it be solicited as such in advance.*

MILTON: Exactly. MIRACLEMAN #9

EXPLOSIVE FINAL ISSUE

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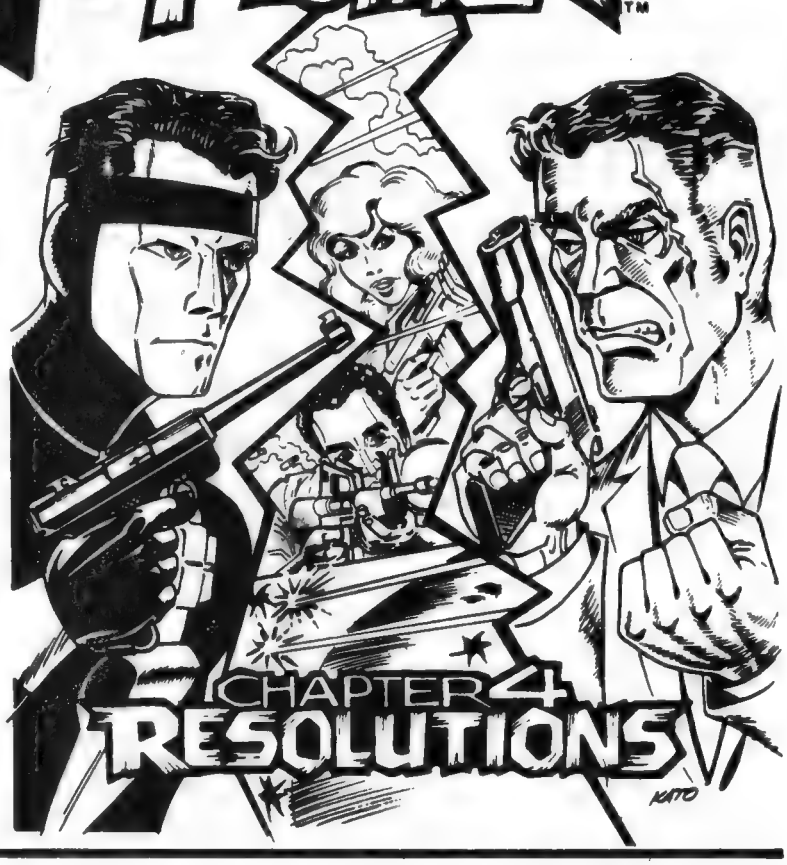

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"We pride ourselves on service."

would not have been a problem for any retailer *if* they had known in advance what they were ordering, and that's true with anything. Each retailer should make their own decision. A store in Greenwich Village in New York can sell a much wider range of merchandise than one in Huntsville, Alabama.

MARK: *What service does the distributor provide for the publisher?*

MILTON: In Capital City's case we get merchandise from their printers' doors to approximately 700 retailers, and we achieve economies of scale that make that possible, because we are combining shipments from more than one printer and more than one publisher. If each publisher had to sell individually to each store, then prices would have to go up, because the cost of administering those orders, of shipping them, would all be at a much high cost per book than is achieved by the current distribution system.

MARK: *So basically a distributor distributes for the publisher. The publisher publishes and you find cost-efficient ways of getting the product to the retailers?*

MILTON: Right. We perform a sales function for them, as well. We spend a tremendous amount of money in our monthly solicitations, in the mailing costs and so on, getting information to the retailers. Our retailers sell more books if they order more intelligently, and everybody along the chain makes more money; so we do perform a sales function for the publishers, and we collect the money and we pay the publishers. In the case of Marvel or DC, if they were dealing with the 700 stores that we ship to on a weekly basis, they would have *huge* staffs and costs associated with it that would be far more, in sum, than the costs that we can do by combining shipments from different publishers and different printers.

MARK: *So is the only way the publisher finds out how many of his or her products sells through the distributor?*

MILTON: Once the publisher gets our advance order they have a very good idea of what their end sales are going to be. Publishers overprint to a greater or lesser degree to fill reorders from us, which we would place in response to reorders from our customers, but basically once they have the order in, they've got their sales function done.

MARK: *In Capital City's order form — which I understand is one of the more exhaustive ones — you still can't run advance art for every single book that's out there. How does the distributor pick and choose which pieces of art to represent?*

MILTON: A lot of it depends upon cooperation from the publishers. Some publishers are much more cooperative at sending us advance art in the proper size and line-screen and so on and it's easier to use, and if it's easier to use we're more likely to use it. We do make decisions on what to run which reduces the total number of graphics we run from the number available — we run less than the number that are available — and those decisions are often based upon what we feel will have the most impact on sales. If we have an advance graphic for a book that has the same creative team and the same character line-up for five issues and we also have a graphic for a book that has had a change in any of those areas, we're more likely to run a graphic for the book that has had a change, because that's the kind of information the retailer needs. We also have usually two products a month that we call our "pick hits" that we feature more prominently, and those are the items that we deem as being the ones that will benefit the most for having more attention paid to them.

MARK: *What does Capital City give to its accounts that would make them want to use you rather than one of the others?*

MILTON: We pride ourselves on service. Our product line is larger than any of our competitors. We have become very *expert* at moving product around the country in very fast methods, using primarily our own trucks. . .to get product into our own warehouses, and we use a lot of delivery routes, bus shipments, air freight, to get product out of our warehouses. We really move the product through fast and accurately and we have, as I say, a significantly larger line than our competition does.

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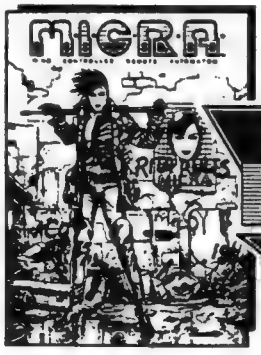


PICK HITS TO CLICK

MICRA #4
(Waldron/Boonthanakit)
Comic Interview

AXA #1
(Dixon/E.B. Romero)
Ken Pierce/Eclipse

"I think the only control there

Back in 1976 (a lifetime ago, for a few of you), in the days when the Marvel Bullpen was located at 575 Madison Avenue in Manhattan, Jerry Perles maintained offices in the same building — although his intimate association with Marvel Comics was a mystery to most, including me.

It was only while ghostwriting a paperback book called CURSE OF THE PHARAOHS for my neighbor on East 77th Street, Russ Jones, that I first learned of the peerless Mr. Perles. He was acting as an agent, supplying material to Carlyle Books, a short-lived paperback imprint. Russ suggested I drop off some of my own prose with Jerry, which I did — though with the considerable amount of regular monthly writing commitments I was already carrying, I never followed up and nothing came of it at the time.

However, during our meeting, Jerry made mention of the fact that he had filed the original copyright or trademark applications for such Marvel characters as Captain America, the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner, among others. This intriguing tidbit lodged in my memory and so, more than ten years later, during a visit to Manhattan this January past, I made a point of getting in touch to set up an interview.

I still had no idea that I was about to strike pay dirt. As it turns out, Jerry Perles played a vital role down through the years in the day-to-day fate and fortune of Marvel Comics, as both legal counsel and friend to founder/publisher Martin Goodman. From the earliest of the early days through to the time when the various Goodman publishing companies were acquired by Cadence Industries in the Seventies, Perles was there to witness it all: The creation of the comic-book industry. The boom war years. The bust following the censorship scare instigated by the infamous Dr. Frederic Wertham during the McCarthy era. The birth of the Marvel Age of Comics under the direction and creative genius of Stan Lee.

Perhaps most interesting of all are the insights and perspective he offers on a mostly unknown and overlooked figure in the history of comics, the man without whom there would be no Marvel today, publisher Martin Goodman...

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT: *Let me ask how you became involved with Martin Goodman of Marvel Comics — how far back do you two go? Tell me about him.*

JERRY PERLES: **Martin Goodman's** wife, **Jean Davis,** and my wife, Blanche, were classmates at New York University School of Fine Arts. We knew Jean before she met Martin. Then Jean met Martin and we double dated.

DAK: *This was about when?*

JERRY: Oh, 1933, around that time. Jean and Blanche are still the best of friends — all these many years — and so, too, my friendship with Martin. The **Goodmans** are down in Palm Beach now for the winter months. We talk to each other about once a week — often, more frequently. We will be with the **Goodmans** again in February. Martin has enjoyed his retirement.

DAK: *What are his hobbies?*

JERRY: Golf. And more golf. He managed to live where it only took him about five minutes from home to a golf course. He led a good life. They have three children. The oldest is Iden, who teaches at Berkeley and is a practicing psychologist. He's named for Jean's mother, whose name was Ida. And then came Chip — really, Charles — who is a publisher. And there is Amy, a daughter; *lovely* looking young woman — has two children. She is highly recognized in her own field, the world of fashion.

DAK: *When did Martin get into publishing?*

JERRY: I believe he started publishing in a co-partnership kind of deal with **Louis Silberkleit.** They were publishing the old pulp Westerns. I believe that there was an agency (Brandt & Brandt) supplying them with material. The Westerns were good looking.. Good stories. Exciting. Justice by the gun and the marshal. The books did well.

DAK: *Did Martin come into publishing well capitalized?*

JERRY: Didn't have a dime. He came from a very large family, very hard working, no money of any kind. Family lived in Brooklyn — about thirteen children. Martin got all kinds of jobs, working hard to bring money home, trying to make a living. Then there was a period when he "bummed" around on freight cars to see the country.

DAK: *That's an interesting image. I only met him many years later —*

JERRY: And that isn't the image you would have gotten.

DAK: *Exactly.*

JERRY: Before his publishing days there were many tramp trips, freight cars, cooking beans over a fire. But he did see the country. I don't think you could mention a town to him that he didn't know about. He is knowledgeable about this country. It helped him a great deal later on in magazine circulation. When he finally settled down he got a job working in a small publishing house, and then **Louis Silberkleit** and he met. The first area of publishing they went into, that I know about, was in pulp Westerns. One of them was called BEST WESTERN. Louis and Martin remained partners for quite a time and then they went their separate ways...and each went on to their separate fortunes.

DAK: *It must have been quite a trick, to come from not even having a publishing background and getting successful enough to one day be, I think you said earlier, a third of Kable's distribution business — that's a lot of stuff to publish.*

JERRY: Martin moved forward big. He always thought big. He was not a small-minded man. He was a gambler. He was a crapshooter.

DAK: *He'd have to be.*

JERRY: Of course, there were losses, but fortunately the gains outweighed the losses

JERRY PERLES

should be is control of the censors."

Jerry Perles, circa 1952.

"Every story in the true detective mag-

"Since Captain America carried a shield, Louis claimed that Martin's book was a rip-off." Above: From CAPTAIN AMERICA #1, Kirby's version of Cap's original shield. Compare, (opposite) to the later version.

by far. He would take his loss, swallow hard, wash it out, and go forward. He held high posture in the publishing field. Martin was a developer of ideas. He was an innovator. He was diversified — there was the detective field: TRUE CRIME, COMPLETE DETECTIVE, EXPOSE DETECTIVE and others. He did Western pulps, paperback books, adventure magazines, etc., etc. He had a great line of paperback books, which I was sorry he ever ended — Lion Books.

DAK: *And that was at a very early stage?*

JERRY: Yes, and over time there was CAPTAIN AMERICA — and the many comics — HUMAN TORCH, SUB-MARINER, super heroes all. The first thing that I really litigated for Martin was CAPTAIN AMERICA.

DAK: *What were you doing back then?*

JERRY: I was practicing law. It was before World War II. After being admitted to practice the only knowledge I had about the publishing business was a tangent one. I had written several crime stories while I was going to law school. It was later on that I sold to some of Martin's magazines. But my knowledge of publishing was nil — no more than any young guy getting out of law school. Oh, I had worked on the NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN as a cub reporter, filling in, trying to make a buck during the Depression. One day, Martin asked me, "What do you know about this kind of a case?" — and he showed me the papers. It was an action to enjoin him from publishing and distributing CAPTAIN AMERICA.

DAK: *On whose behalf?*

JERRY: The action was brought by **Louis Silberkleit,** who had a comic magazine then fairly new, but already out, called THE SHIELD. Since Captain America carried a shield, Louis claimed that Martin's book was a rip-off. I didn't think so and, of course, neither did Martin. Fortunately, neither did the Court.

DAK: *Well, this might explain something: I've seen reprints of the original CAPTAIN AMERICA #1 and he had a badge-shaped shield, and I think with the second issue he had a round shield.*

JERRY: Could be. It could be one of the things we agreed to change. Too much time has gone by for me to remember. In any event, I was glad that THE SHIELD and CAPTAIN AMERICA were on the side of the Allies against the Axis. The Court's decision encouraged Martin to go ahead in the comic magazine field. The right to use the name, style and character CAPTAIN AMERICA sustained the position that there was no falsifying to the public, there was no confusion possible; the names were so different. The Court denied the injunction and the action was dismissed. CAPTAIN AMERICA went on to beat the Nazis and the Japanese.

And then I read for libel. Martin had true detective magazines. No story was bought by the editor before it was sent to me for reading — to avoid libel. We set up a form to be completed by every author and we'd send it to him to sign and have notarized. That convinced the author to avoid anything that was false; he didn't want to be accused of or prosecuted for using the mails fraudulently.

DAK: *A-ha!! (Laughter.)*

JERRY: For example, there was one chap who sold a story about some sheriff in Iowa who became a local hero solving a murder by the clue of a rose found at the foot of this beautiful woman — they always were beautiful women. Except for one problem. No such crime ever took place. He was one embarrassed sheriff. . .who in turn brought a law suit for damages. The sheriff's case was settled and the author went to jail.

DAK: *I always assumed that "true detective" books weren't really true.*

JERRY: Oh no! Every single story in the true detective magazines published by Martin was true. We got an affidavit from the author on *every* story that was bought. The affidavit asked where the material came from, where the photos came from, what police authorities were interviewed, and so forth. We wanted to know because the case of libel rested on the matter of truth. Defense to libel is truth, so we had to be able to back up the story.

DAK: *That's interesting.*

JERRY: Martin would fight me about going after the author of a false story. He never wanted to prosecute anybody. He was a worrier, too, about doing anything that was not right. He had a magazine once called SEX HEALTH. Today you could read that magazine in St. Patrick's and never get hit by lightning; but, in *those* days the magazine could be considered *daring.* Martin was a worrier; he did not want to offend. The magazine was never attacked. As insurance — he hired a doctor to pass on each article.

I remember one time he came out with a magazine, a complete book done in magazine format. This particular book was written by then top crime writer **Mike Stern** and published in hardcover. It was the story of prostitution in New York City in those days, and the efforts of the district attorney to close down the crime operation. The book was, I think, called THE YELLOW TICKET — because the yellow

azines published by Martin was true."

ticket was the girl's proof of every "trick" she serviced. The ticket was punched so she'd know her score and how much money she was entitled to at the end of her day. The book had graphic descriptions of bordello life and actual testimony in the trial. That was *daring*. Martin was concerned about publishing the issue. Martin's words were: "My God, what about obscenity and lawsuits?" To strengthen the right to publish — or lessen the problem — we got a minister over in Brooklyn who wrote a preface, and allowed the use of his photo, in order to make his statement that the material would let people know the dangers of prostitution, how girls were used, how crime worked. It was a very colorful book. It enjoyed quite a good sale.

DAK: *As a publisher, what do you think he concentrated on? Where did he spend his energy?*

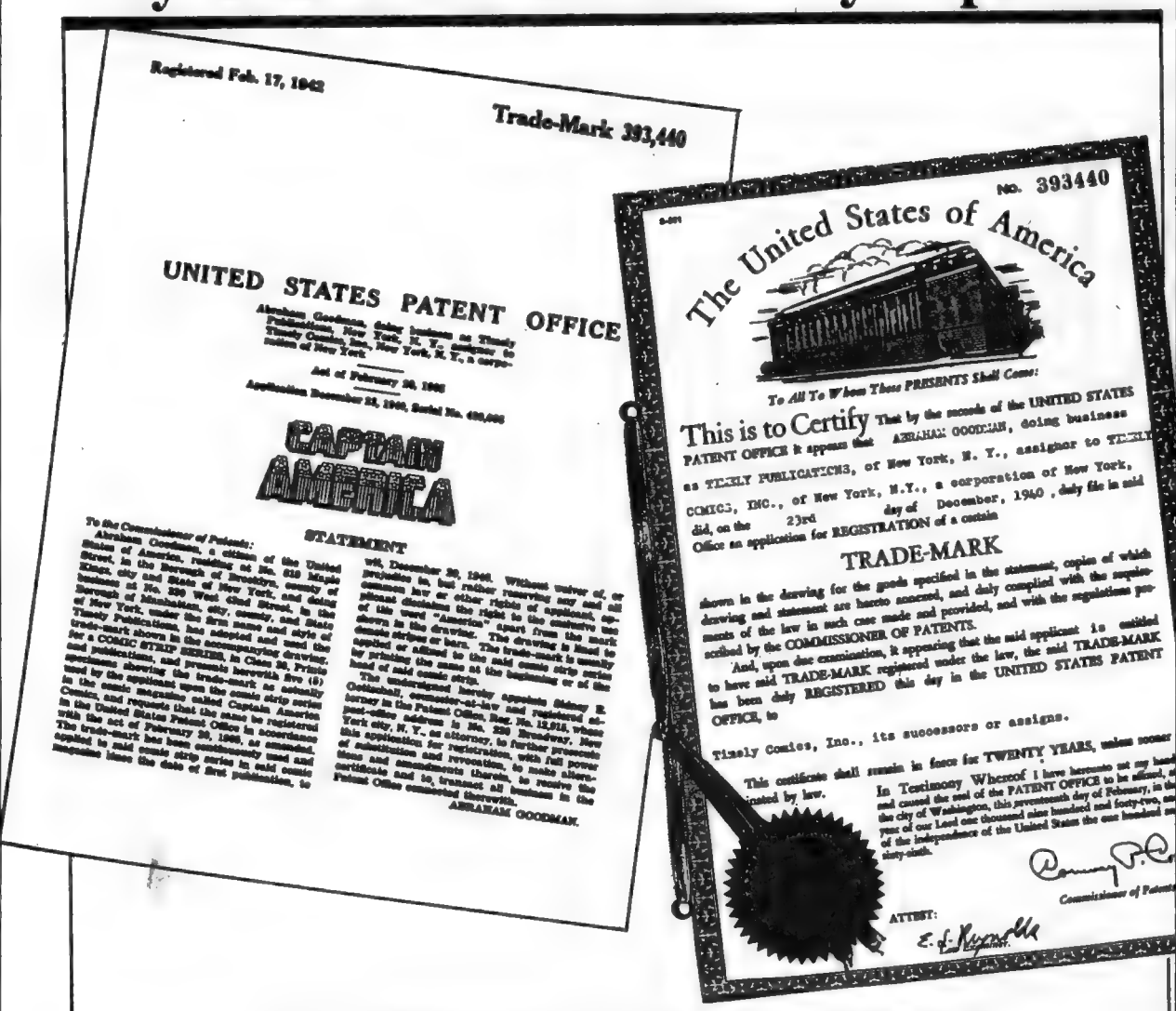
JERRY: Creative ideas. Circulation. Evaluating whether a new publication was worthwhile. People were always coming to him with new ideas. I think another area in which Martin had magic was his ability to pick people who knew how to write, whether for the comics or other publications — **Mario Puzo, Bruce Friedman** and, of course, **Stan Lee.** There are many others.

Here is an interesting certificate issued by the Commissioner of Patents to Timely Comics, Inc. The trademark application was made December 23, 1940, for registration of CAPTAIN AMERICA and its unusual lettering. It was put through for a comic strip series in class 38, the prints and publications class. It was signed by **Abraham Goodman,** Martin's brother. That was about the time, too, that other things came out from the **Martin Goodman** office, like Prince Namor the Sub-Mariner, and the Human Torch. The only copies I have of those are now framed and hanging in my grandchildren's rooms. It was good art. And they were the hero stories, of course. Evil was being chased and destroyed by the super figures. So superhero-type figures were being prepared back in 1940. They were the forerunners of Rambo — and much cleaner. That was the time, I would say, of **Simon** and **Kirby.** They were good storytellers, good editors, good writers. **Stan Lee** came in a bit later and took comics to gigantic heights.

DAK: *Isn't he a nephew or something of Martin's?*

JERRY: Stan is a *cousin* of **Jean Goodman.** Stan came to work for Martin as a young man. I believe that Martin gave Stan the opportunity to write, and Stan did. And how Stan did! Stan had great ideas and great stories. He created a whole new line of imaginative thinking. A new business of fantasy. He deserves all the success he has had. I remember — after he married Joan, a beautiful girl from Britain — Stan standing poolside at their big home in Hewlett with a typewriter on a raised table. Stan in bathing trunks, writing stories, at the same time getting suntanned. *(Laughter.)* He always had a tremendous sense of humor.

"My client is the son of a very important



"The Court's decision encouraged Martin to go ahead in the comic magazine field."

He was a *happy* individual, and he made people happy. Stan took the comics field to new heights. He developed comics into a real story-art form. Stan carried on a tradition that was started in a big measure by **Martin Goodman,** changing the formats and the styles to update, the way Stan felt it should go. But there had to be a beginning, and that was Martin.

Martin also has a brother, Abe, who worked for him.

DAK: *He's the one on the trademark?*

JERRY: Yes. He worked for Martin in various areas and had much to do with contact with wholesalers and distribution, and when he came back from World War II he was with Martin for a while and then he decided *he* would go into publishing on his own. He had a great sense of humor, so he went into humor magazines. He has since retired.

DAK: *As he began to publish the comic books, did Martin still do the pulp magazines, the paperbacks?*

JERRY: As he was developing comics he still stayed in the various fields. He was a multi-publisher. He had a paperback line, romance magazines, motion picture and television magazines, adventure magazines, and more. As new areas developed, Martin went into them. His paperbacks had good authors, and he *developed* good authors. **Mario Puzo** worked for him.

DAK: *THE GODFATHER created a category of its own.*

JERRY: Right.

DAK: *I worked in Georgia for a publisher and an editor before me was Don Pendleton, who writes the EXECUTIONER books. He had written his first EXECUTIONER book and he couldn't sell it anywhere, until THE GODFATHER hit — then they got in touch with him and said, "That book that you sent before, send it back!"*

JERRY: This will happen. Look at all the Mafia-type properties since THE GODFATHER.

DAK: *It's funny how the chains of events work out.*

JERRY: Timing is important, too. Also, how a property is presented is important. I have a client — Vinnie, by name — a *dapper* guy, the **Georgie Raft** type, the son of a very important man in the early days of organized crime. When Poppa was on the street people kissed his hand. **Frank Costello** would come visit Poppa to pay respects. Well, Vinnie wanted to tell his story and I got him a writer — the book was good. He talked about his background as a young man growing up in his kind of environment where Poppa was *really* the head. The book was extra exciting because

man in the early days of organized crime."

Martin and Jean Goodman at their Long Island home, circa 1950

it was real — real names were used — unlike the GODFATHER. The book was called UNLESS THEY KILL ME FIRST. As I said, timing is important. Oh, it sold hardcover and then as a paperback. *Now,* several years later, we are being approached for the book as a possibility for a motion picture for television. Properties do live. There's no *death* of a literary property. At a particular time, if it is the right time, it can come back to the marketplace.

DAK: *Sol Brodsky told me some things about Martin. Do you remember Sol?*

JERRY: Sure.

DAK: *I really liked Sol. He passed away a couple years ago, but Sol told me that one time when he was going on vacation, he asked Martin if he could have an advance until he got back — Martin said, "It'll spoil your vacation to worry about paying back an advance, just take this and keep it for your vacation."*

JERRY: Martin was generous. He helped a lot of authors survive. He also encouraged a lot of people to write, and took chances on a lot of authors. He recognized talent. I don't remember Martin ever writing, but he recognized a writer.

DAK: *It seems like some of the things you've discussed about Martin's dealings with the distributors led him into the various different publishing categories, depending on what was doing well.*

JERRY: A distributor knows what they and other distributors are selling and if there is something new that was going well, he might suggest one of his publishers to come into the field. A lot of stuff that Martin did was based upon the fact of what other publishers started. If Martin thought the magazine was going to be a good property, he too would get into it. And other publishers did the same. Very much in Martin's publishing life was a fellow named **Frank Torpey.** Frank was a devoted, gentle human being. He knew the field of distribution, and he knew the wholesalers. He had his magazine ear to the ground. **Torpey** was the one who really took Martin into the comics field. **Martin Goodman** always looked for new ideas. I knew the fellows in CBS business affairs. They had shows like CASEY — CRIME PHOTOGRAPHER that made good comic-book properties. A license agreement with CBS allowed Martin to come out with comic books based on television properties.

Martin knew circulation. He would personally sit down and use a pencil and go through the circulation galleys, and he would constantly make changes. He controlled very carefully the distribution of his magazines.

DAK: *That's another thing Sol Brodsky told me: He briefly went into partnership with a man named Waldman and they did a black-and-white comic magazine line called Skywald; Sol said what happened to them was that they weren't watching the distribution galleys and they were sending 50,000 copies to Hawaii and 45,000 were coming back.*

JERRY: This can happen in the publishing business.

DAK: *So Sol said they got somebody to monitor distribution galleys and that kind of got them back on their feet again.*

JERRY: Martin did watch the circulation. It paid off.

DAK: *This sounds like enough stuff to keep any publisher busy. How did he have time to do anything else?*

JERRY: Martin always had time to play golf. He always found time to lie down and

"He'd write 'bullshit' on the page."

take a nap after lunch. Martin had a lot of time for his family. He traveled a good deal with his wife, all over Europe, all over the United States. They would go to California to visit people who were in the movie industry they were writing about. Martin was a quiet man, shy in a sense. I never heard him boast. He tried to pay his people well, and he protected them. I don't remember his ever firing anybody, but if he had to, I think he would have gotten somebody else to do it. He was that kind of guy. And Chip learned his trade by being in his father's office, getting to know all about the buying of paper, printing and binding. How you turn out a magazine. And when the opportunity came — his timing was perfect — Martin sold his business for a good sum of money. Cadence Industries bought it. Chip stayed on for a while and then went into business for himself. He is a successful publisher today. As a matter of fact, I spoke to Chip yesterday late afternoon, I told him you were coming here — he knows you.

DAK: *Yeah, I used to work for him, in 1975, back when he was publishing Atlas/Seaboard Comics. That was a short-lived company. Stan Lee told me that there were several times in Martin's career as a publisher that the comics would more or less shut down and then he'd have to start over, and I guess one of those times was when he tried to do distribution through the earlier Atlas — his own company.*

JERRY: No. The company was never shut down because of any bridging period. When he separated from Kable Distribution, he already had made the deal with Atlas, which was a company *he* formed. He didn't have to shut down. He had his own distribution company. And, he had good men. Martin later closed Atlas because it was more efficient for him at that time to have one of the big independent distributors do the job. But Martin never really shut down. I don't even *know* of any issue that was missed. He had books coming out at different times during every month. Not all of the books and magazines came out at the same time. He had a great number of publications in different fields.

DAK: *Well, when Martin was doing the different publishing, did you stay affiliated with him?*

JERRY: I was his general counsel up to the point where he sold the business. Then he retained an attorney who was very talented in finance, setting up the sale, and who brought him the buyer. That was not my know-how.

DAK: *So you were there for the whole time until the sale?*

JERRY: Martin and I have been friends from the time we first met to today. I will be seeing him soon when I go down to Palm Beach. Ours is a friendship built on many years. It's not a business relationship.

Jerry Perles, left, with Martin Goodman, at Palm Beach. "He came from a very large family, very hard working, no money of any kind. There was a period when he 'bummed' around on freight cars to see the country. The first thing that I really litigated for Martin was CAPTAIN AMERICA. It was before World War II. CAPTAIN AMERICA went on to beat the Nazis and the Japanese."

Martin is retired, he hasn't been feeling too well, so he's got to take it a lot easier. But he still loves to talk about the trade — who's doing what. There are a lot of new people he doesn't know now, because he's been out for quite a while, but a lot of people he knows are still in: **John Hayes,** who used to be president of Martin's company, now living in Texas, will call me, like he did at Christmas, to wish me Happy Holidays and always remember to ask, "How's Martin feeling and send him my best." Martin enjoys hearing stories of the trade.

DAK: *I figured, by extension, he probably kept up, because you asked me some questions about the direct sales market and so I knew that you kept up with new developments.*

JERRY: First of all, I'm now general counsel of a distributing company, so, I would know about direct sales. It's an incestuous business. I represent authors, and agent their properties. We negotiate terms of sale with publishing companies, whether it's Simon & Schuster or Random House, or whoever. We do negotiate book deals. It may be an original paperback, it may be a hardcover. And while we represent Kable News Company, a national/international distributor of books and magazines, I also have good friends at Curtis, Select and ICD.

DAK: *You go back and forth?*

JERRY: Yes. And everybody knows everybody else in the business. As a matter of fact, some guy recently came in with a new "comic" book idea. We thought it had merit and he asked if we would represent him in trying to negotiate a deal with Marvel Comics. So I called **Jim Galton,** a very nice guy and easy to talk to. It's a friendly business. It's competitive and it's hard, but when you're in it, you know the people. You never sell the hard way. You

"I was very opposed to Wertham."

sell if they want your property. So, too, we're into various magazines in various fields. We represent authors who write for them. We represent some of the publishers. We are into paperback *and* hardcover, as well as being in the license field, all of which takes us into options and deals in television and motion pictures.

DAK: *When Martin had somebody to head up, to edit a line, as Stan with comics, did he sort of just publish whatever they decided to edit, or did Martin give them a lot of direction?*

JERRY: He put direction in. He did not say, "Okay, you're the editor of this line of publications, therefore you do whatever you want and just check with me every now and then. I'll look at the numbers and see how you're doing." Oh, no! To the best of my memory, Martin looked at all the blueline proofs and he would check out story lines and what graphics were going in. There were times when he would *definitely* say, "Hey, I don't want this kind of crap!"

DAK: *So he was sort of an editor-in-chief?*

JERRY: For sure. He'd oversee.

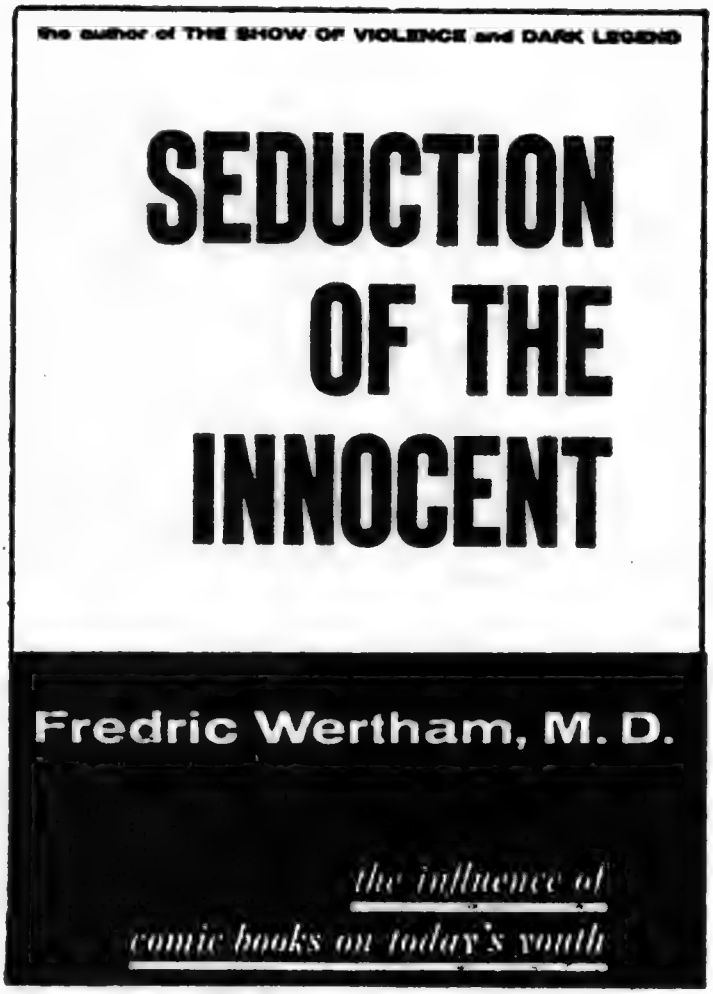
DAK: *Stan told me that if Martin didn't like something when it came in he'd call Stan in and take a book and smack it with the back of his hand — that was his way of saying, "What is this?"*

JERRY: And sometimes he'd take a pencil and write "bullshit" right on the sheet or page. He wasn't bashful at all. Other times he'd come in and talk to you and say what he was thinking. Mostly, he didn't have to, because the guys he'd pick — like Stan, like Mario, like **Noah Salat** — were *good* people. But he had very definite ideas and principles. He was a very big believer in not offending church, babies, dogs, apple pie and motherhood. But he would not hesitate to hit hard with a story if it was a good one and true. . .and worthwhile.

DAK: *Who would you say was his main competitor?*

JERRY: Oh, he had quite a few in the different fields. Martin did a lot of crossword puzzle stuff. Then there was great competition in the comics field, of course. While there were competitors they, nevertheless, were friendly to one another. Their joint efforts for charity are well known.

Martin was a guy who shared. He gave to charities with a full heart. He believed in people and learned from all. His wife's knowledge of art didn't hurt any — she bought, over the years, a few little things like a **Picasso** and such. Their homes are absolutely wonderful — both the one in New York and the one in Florida. Fine antiques, great art. His most recent gift was to the Norton Museum in Palm Beach of "Portrait a la Toque Bleue" by **Matisse.**


the author of THE SHOW OF VIOLENCE and DARK LEGEND
SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT
Fredric Wertham, M. D.
the influence of
comic books on today's youth

"As far as I'm concerned, when you open the door a little bit to censorship — you've opened the door to full censorship."

JERRY: She also bought the works of unknowns, because she believed. There are many young artists who she encouraged by buying their work.

DAK: *That's what they say is the best way to do it.*

JERRY: Right. Going back to Martin, he always knew what was going on in his business. I remember the time we had a problem with a psychiatrist who was yelling all over the country about the *bad* influence of comics.

DAK: *Wertham.*

JERRY: Wertham, or whatever. I was very much opposed to him from a legal point of view, because of my own love of the First Amendment. I didn't feel the doctor belonged in the field of comics. Secondly, I didn't see the world falling apart because of comic magazines. He was talking about violence — a lot of nonsense. It was **Attorney General Meese**-type talk. My feelings about **Attorney General Meese** right now are no different than what I felt *then* about **Wertham.** I think they are the troublemakers.

The industry formed a comics association. *Some* publishers of comics — the high and mighty — didn't want to join the association, because they felt that they didn't offend. Why join an association and get tarred with another's brush? My own feeling was that comics *didn't* need the GOOD HOUSEKEEPING-type of approval. There was more patriotism in a comic book than in a roomful of "do-gooders." But they formed the association and what it meant

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'If you want to read pornographic stuff read the Meese report. Shameful."

was getting your "lines" approved, so that you could have the goody-goody symbol on your magazine to show that you were free of taint. Well, I just don't believe in that sort of thing. Martin and I had quite a few discussions about that. I was not in accord with it. I was against the principle of having committee approval of thoughts.

DAK: *That's a current issue in the comic-book field again.*

JERRY: I didn't know that. I would oppose it, just as I oppose **Meese** in trying to control publications and trying to mark every so-called "sophisticated" magazine sinful and a part of organized crime. It's censorship, pure — or not so pure — and simple. As far as I'm concerned, when you open the door a little bit to censorship — just the slightest bit — you've opened the door to full censorship. You either believe in the First Amendment, or you don't believe in it at all. Nobody compels anybody to buy anything, and nobody buys a book for the purpose of killing or maiming somebody. Evil must be in that person's mind long before a book is bought.

DAK: *How did all that affect the publication of comics at the time?*

JERRY: Well, for a while, it had an effect in reduced sales. It made publishers gun shy. It made them wonder what they could say or not say. Eventually, the censorship died, just as **Joe McCarthy** did, just as **Meese** will.

DAK: *Yeah.*

JERRY: **Meese,** I've got two volumes sitting here. If you want to read pornographic stuff read the **Meese** report. Somebody got a vicarious kick out of including certain material. The manner in which they took certain witnesses was, itself, shameful. Further, they didn't call upon enough people who were *really* in the publishing business, who knew what it was about — publishers and authors. They stayed away from them. They selected their own kind of witnesses.

DAK: *Loaded the deck?*

JERRY: So it appears to me, and to others.

DAK: *I guess that's a concern, because you're also affiliated with Kable.*

JERRY: Well, it's a concern for that, and surely for other reasons. It's a concern, too, because I represent authors who want to write the way that things are in the world. There should be a freedom to write, and there should be a freedom to read, and I think the only control there should be is control of the censors.

DAK: *Everybody's very touchy. You know about the chains that have stopped handling certain classes of magazines?*

JERRY: The reason for it is that the fundamentalists and the other groups involved are organized. They are well organized. The guys who buy PENTHOUSE or PLAYBOY or HIGH SOCIETY, or whatever else, are not organized. PENTHOUSE has done a tremendous job to alert the public. They have been very much in the forefront of saying, "Do you want to be told what you may read? What you're bringing on is another form of dictatorship."

Distributors like Kable have supported the freedom to read, and the freedom to distribute.

DAK: *How was it when the Wertham comic-book scare was going on?*

JERRY: Publishers had problems. *Again,* the holier-than-thou people came in very strong, but they went away. Thank God the American people are free and independent. You can step on their toes lightly and then only for a while. Continue to interfere with their freedom, then watch out.

Blanche and Jerry Perles, circa 1952.

"HIGH CLASS INTERGALACTIC HIGH JINKS"
—Alyce Atkinson
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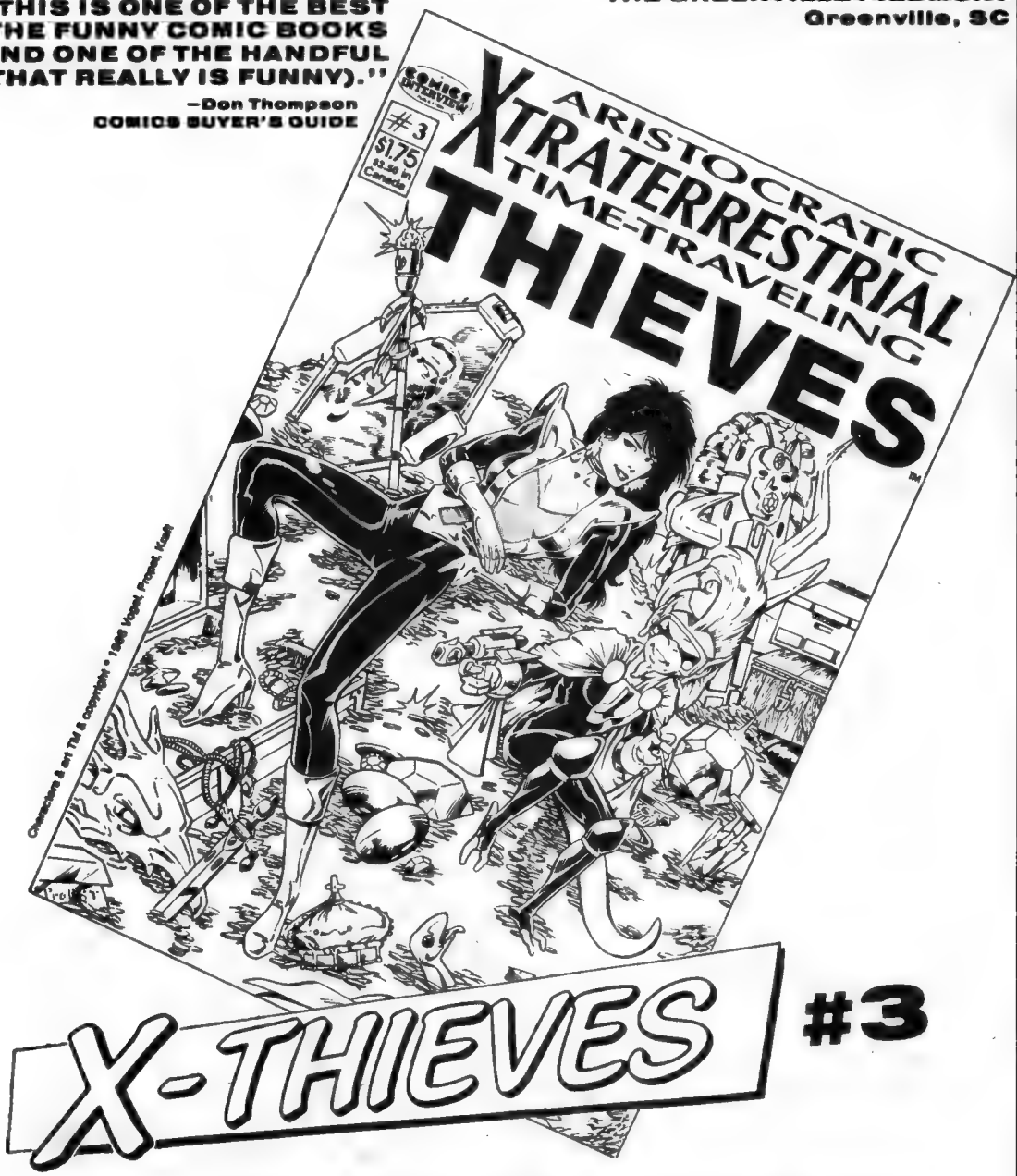

X-THIEVES #3

When you were a kid, didn't you hate it when your mom told you **what** to do, **when** to do it, and **how** to do it? Now that you're an adult, you don't put up with that sort of stuff, right? Right!

But what if MOM stood for Mobile Obedience Machine? What if MOM was made of the strongest alloy in the known universe? What if you were holding MOM for ransom?

What then — ?

COMICS INTERVIEW PUBLICATION

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LAST WORD

Comics Interview 234 Fifth Ave. Suite 301 New York, NY 10001

AN OPEN LETTER

TO: Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Howard Chaykin, Marv Wolfman, Bill Sienkiewicz, Steve Bissette, John Totleben, Dave Gibbons, Jerry Ordway, George Perez, Terry Austin, Chris Claremont, Art Adams, Paul Smith, Mark Evanier, John Byrne, Walter Simonson, Louise Simonson, Brent Anderson, Moebius, Sergio Aragiones, Mike Barr, Len Wein and Barry Windsor-Smith.

Gentlefolk,

The war's over. You lost.

It would be one thing if DC had elected simply to label the material they were going to produce, if they had elected simply to tell the public what it was getting. The fact that they are implementing editorial standards at the same time means one thing, pure and simple — the abortion of any attempt at maturity at either house, ever again.

Ask yourselves why they need formal standards, if they are going to label the material. Once they have admitted that certain of their "Mature" titles are not to be allowed to younger readers without parental consent, what reasonably stops them from giving the artists and writers their creative head? Why lay down rules?

Because there aren't going to be any new "Mature" titles, if they can help it. DC — and most likely Marvel, by the time their standards are publicized — don't want books they have to tell someone *they can't buy*. Remember the famous Marvel ad in PUBLISHERS WEEKLY? The little tyke, smiling trustfully up at **Danny Crespi?** Remember the warm and wonderful caption — "Would You Take His Last Dollar? We'll Help!" They don't *want* artists producing meaningful, personally satisfying work. *They want the dollars*. They're not going to jeopardize the marketability of their blessed trademarks, and put all those beloved merchandising dollars at risk, just to give the talent the satisfaction of doing the best job you know how to do.

Oh, it will never be obvious — those standards don't look so bad, do they? I mean, who can really object to not showing destructive behavior as acceptable? Or salacious content? I mean, it's so reasonable of them, isn't it, to *allow* talent to take controversial positions. (Does anyone at DC recognize the *obscenity* of that particular paragraph?) But wait until you see what happens when you even come close to stretching those standards. The arm around the shoulder. The friendly grin. The conspiratorial chuckle. It isn't that they want to actually *censor* you, no, of course not, never crossed their minds. They believe in **their** creators. It's just that, well, they want to avoid giving needless offense just for the sake of giving offense and — what's that? Why, gosh, I guess when you come right down to it, *all* offense is really needless, isn't it? And at that point, the smile will be a little more reptilian, the chuckle a little more gloating, and the only other sound in the room will be the clatter of another set of surplus testicles bouncing into the corner...

Some of you may avoid this fate. Frank, the six or seven million dollars DARK KNIGHT has poured into DC's coffers will probably let you steer an independent course. You're worth almost as much as the lunch boxes and cartoons to DC — at the moment. But Alan — you won't be that lucky. And the rest of you — I guarantee that right now, in those two big buildings on Fifth and Madison Avenues, people are sitting behind desks and saying, "Well, so what? We have to protect our titles, and if they don't like it, hell, remember **Gardner Fox** and **Jack Kirby**. There's plenty more where they came from." They don't give a damn what you *say*, as long as you toe the company line. But if you *act* on those words, it won't be long before we hear some company drone justifying your departure by saying "no one holds a gun to **Al Milgrom**'s head and makes him take $325,000 a year..."

It's up to you, now. If you want to produce grown-up work for grown-up readers, it's time to recognize the fact that Marvel and DC aren't the places to do it, anymore. C'mon out here in the woods with the rest of us proles, find a publisher who isn't afraid to publish mature work and admit it, and turn to. Leave the "professionals" to their Underoos and their Flexographic smears.

Richard S. McEnroe
26 Nantuckey Place
Scarsdale, NY 10583

CENSORSHIP, PURE & SIMPLE

Dear David,

I had decided that the (in)famous "censorship debate" should be laid to rest (really, I had!) but due to the comments of **Darrel L. Boatz** in #33 I feel compelled to try to clarify a couple of points. (*ie.* don't look at me, *he* started it! — or something like that).

Mr. Boatz says that censorship is not needed to combat such extreme cases as snuff films and child pornography, but rather that they should be treated "not as an artform deserving to be censored and restricted but as a crime in need of obliteration." But just because you would restrict them under *criminal* law does not mean that you would not also be *censoring* them. (This was a point I tried to make earlier. That *any* restriction of freedom of expression *for whatever reason* is censorship and, by extension, the actual legal procedure used in a particular circumstance would not alter the *fact* of censorship.) Let's say that it is made a criminal offense to wear a red shirt or to play tiddlywinks. Even though it is a criminal law and even though it has other effects, part of its force would be to censor free expression (of red shirts or tiddlywinks) in the media.

Secondly, I am not so sure that a criminal law against the making of snuff films, for instance, is sufficient to deal with the problem. (If you propose to make it a criminal offense to *show* a snuff film, then this is censorship, pure and simple, I think.) Let's say that a snuff film has been made in a foreign country and even that its makers have been duly tried, convicted, and punished in that country under its criminal law. How then do you prevent the distribution and exhibition of the film in your country? So, I think my original point is made: That certain things can only be restricted by censorship, in one form or another. (Whether this is desirable is another question, of course.)

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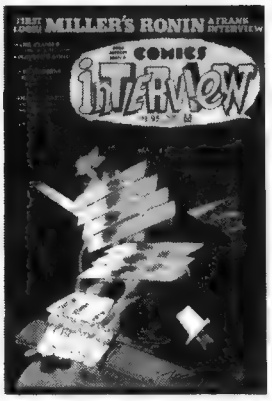

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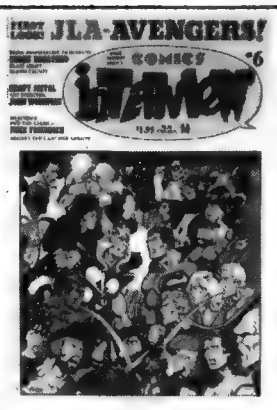

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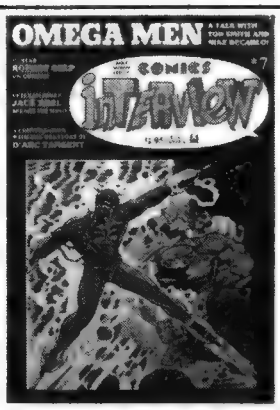

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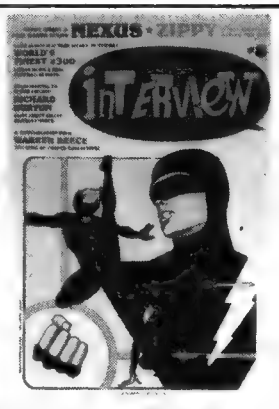

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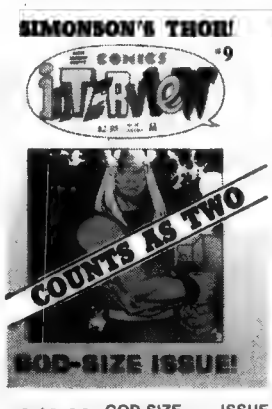

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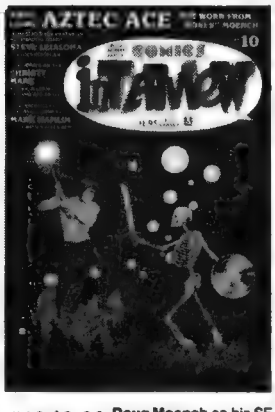

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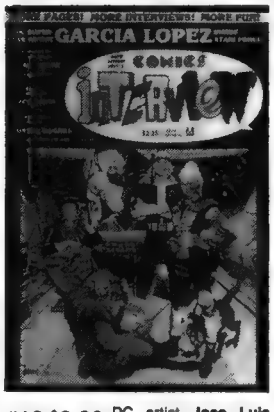

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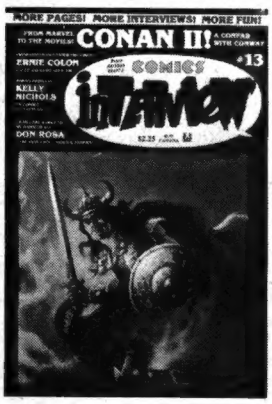

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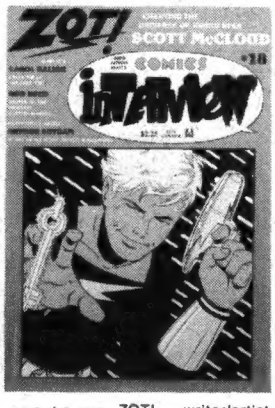

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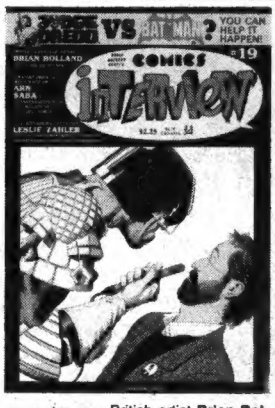

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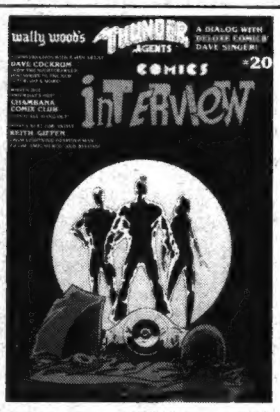

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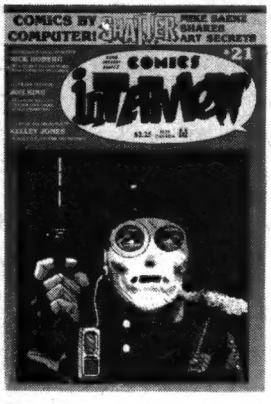

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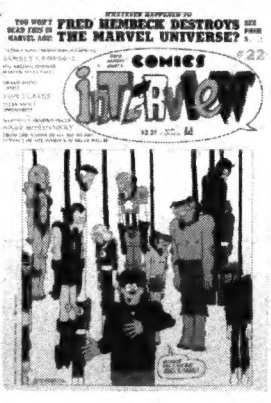

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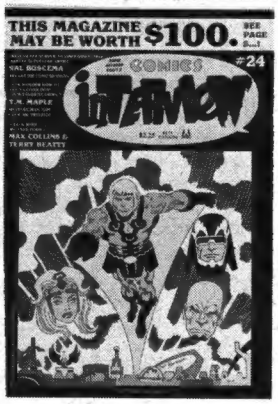

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Kraft:

Most discussions of censorship and classification in comics are unrealistic.

Some large retailers and wholesalers are afraid that today's unregulated comics can create a backlash that will destroy their market, and they advocate a return to earlier standards — ignoring the fact that much (maybe most) of the success of today's comics is due to the steady enlargement of the graphic story's boundries.

Other retailers have suggested a tiered system of classification — however, if there are more than two classifications (essentially, "adult" and "juvenile"), the retailer is forced into a legally untendable position. If there's a 12-to-17 year-old category, let's say, the retailer must establish the customer's age. Yet, as a retailer, I know it is impractical to "card" anyone under driving age. They have no identification. And many teenagers may look much older than they are. That third category could have serious legal repercussions for us.

At the same time, many of the creators are refusing to deal with a very real problem for parents — some of today's comics aren't for kids, and really should not be read by them.

Finally, the comics publishers are not dealing realistically with the medium — and with their readers, who are growing older and are seeking more mature reading.

(Parenthetically, I'm doubtful that comic books have *ever* been sold primarily to children — those under 17, let's say — except for clearly juvenile titles and for the early days of the Comics Code. From the very beginning, there was a strong adult audience.)

The solution? We label comic books that are suitable for young readers as "suitable for young readers" or "suitable for family reading." That's it. We don't label anything else. (After all, novels and short stories for adults aren't labeled "adult" or "mature" unless they are really porno.) Then we retailers use some judgement about selling marginal titles to younger readers.

And then, too, this industry does what it should have done fifty years ago — it informs the public in every way it can that the graphic story is for people of *every* age and interest. In this way, we will both tell the truth and benefit from the telling.

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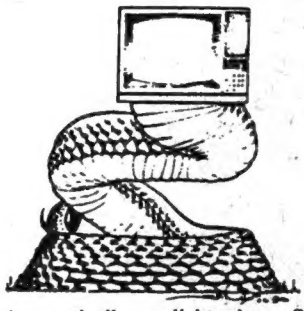

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Comics Interview

So far, there are only four titles from David Anthony Kraft's publishing company, but I like all of them.

• *MICRA* is an acronym for *M*ind *C*ontrolled *R*emote *A*utomaton. It is also one heck of a good comic book by Lamar Waldron and Ted Boonthanakit. This is a 12-issue limited series about a crippled woman who can project her consciousness into an automaton (see the title).

That is a much-too-simplified summation of a rich, complex SF novel in comic-book form. Ted's art has been compared to many different American artists (none of whose work Ted has seen; he was born in Thailand and grew up in Africa) and is remarkably clear and exciting.

Grade: A.

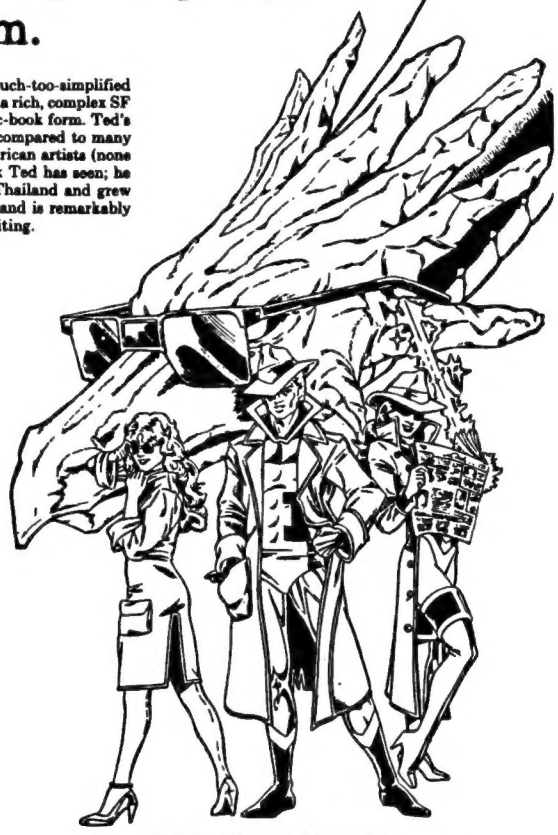
MICRA™
MIND CONTROLLED REMOTE AUTOMATON

• *Aristocratic X-traterrestrial Time-Traveling Thieves* (*X-Thieves* for short) has had two first issues, which is annoying to indexers and compilers of price guides, but the bright, sprightly scripts by Henry Vogel and the appropriately humorous art of Mark Propst make up for that. One of the main features of this comic book is that, like the *Mad* comic books, the panels are filled with gags, such as the crisis hotline which warns: "New universe forming — disaster imminent!"

The Southern Knights make a guest appearance in the second first issue, in which the X-Thieves steal the formula for original Coca-Cola. This is one of the best of the funny comic books (and one of the handful that really *is* funny).

Grade: A.

X-THIEVES™



SOUTHERN KNIGHTS™

• I haven't seen the last couple of issues of *Southern Knights* yet but, unless the series has gone radically downhill since #16, this is still one of the best and most original of all the supergroups. Grade: A.

• While *Comics Interview* is not a comic book, I think I can squeeze in a recommendation. This excellent publication gives a well-rounded view of the industry, with interviews with writers, pencillers, inkers, letterers, colorists, and others.

Naturally, your interest in an issue will depend on who is being interviewed, but there have been 40 issues of *Comics Interview* and no totally dull ones — not even the *G.I. Joe* issue. Grade: A.

Four titles.
Four As. Four for four. Way to go, Dave.

— Don Thompson
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